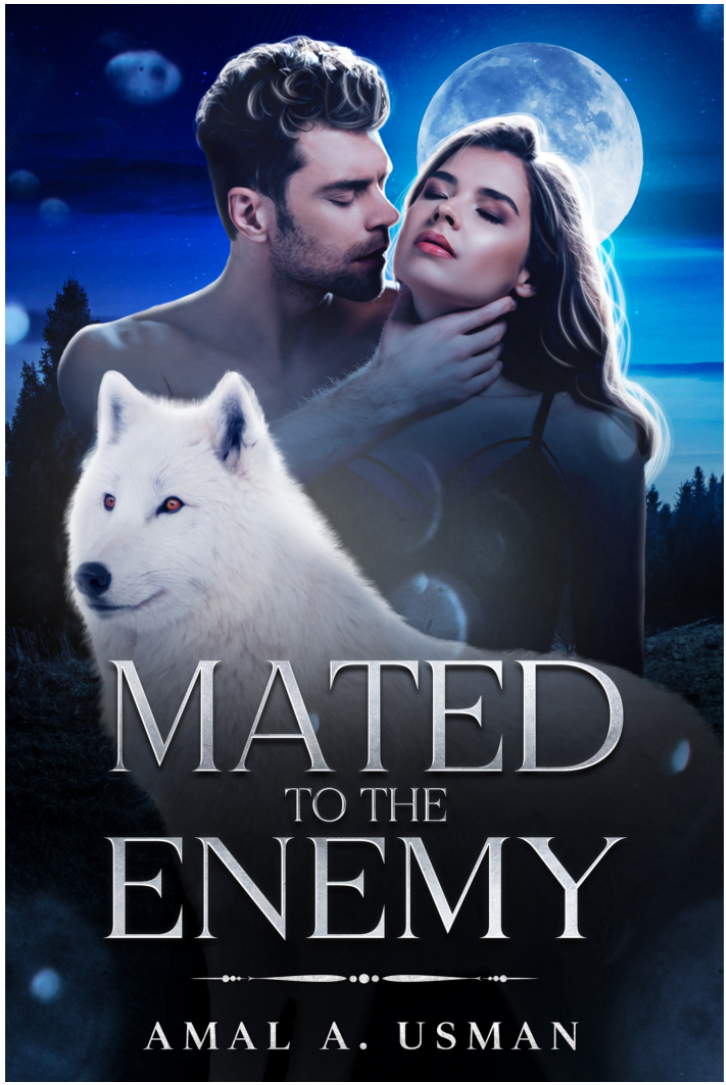

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Mated To The Enemy

Amal A. Usman

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WARNING

Before you begin, this book contains mature and sensitive themes such as abuse, violence, and offensive language. It includes situations that may be triggering for some readers, so caution is advised. This is a work of fiction, and I do NOT condone any situations or actions in the book.

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CHAPTER ONE

I gaze at my reflection in the mirror, tilting my head to the side as I assess myself. Biting my bottom lip, I ponder whether I've chosen the perfect dress for tonight. The lime-colored tulle dress boasts draped asymmetrical cutouts and a statement shoulder, complemented by an open sleeve. Marie, my wolf, insists it's beautiful, assuring me that everyone will be dazzled by it. Still, doubts linger.

The alpha kids have a way of making me feel inferior, even in a thousand-dollar gown. Though they never express it to my face, their silent judgments are evident. It's written all over their faces. However, I refuse to let it affect me. Despite the doubts, I know I'm rocking this dress, and I'll confidently stride into that room as if I own it. Let them think what they want; tonight, I'm showcasing a different kind of strength—one that doesn't crumble under their unspoken criticisms.

“You look stunning, sweetheart,” a warm voice whisper behind me. I glance in the mirror and catch Mom entering my room. Her beautiful blonde hair, a trait I inherited, is elegantly styled with a slick middle-down part and super straight strands. In contrast, my own locks are fashioned in a teased chignon with loose tendrils framing my face. A small smile plays on my lips. Mom always knows just what to say to make me feel better. It must be a mom thing.

"Thank you, Mom," I reply, turning around to face her.

"Gosh, you resemble me so much when I was younger," she remarks, taking my hand in hers. Mom’s gorgeous sky-blue eyes, which I also stole from her, sparkle with adoration.

"I doubt Dad would say the same," I quip.

"That's his business," she chuckles. "C’mon, let’s go. I don’t want

your father giving me an earful about how we ladies take forever to get ready." She grabs my hand, and together, we make our way out of the room.

Descending the sweeping staircase, we join Dad at the foot. He doesn't see Mom and me approaching as he is typing on his phone. Being a billionaire and an alpha king keeps him busy. He is dressed nicely in a black tux with his raven black hair gelled back.

"Happy birthday, Dad," I greet. He's hitting the big five-oh today.

"Thank you, baby girl," he responds, pocketing his phone and wrapping his arms around Mom's waist. Nuzzling into the nape of her neck, he takes a deep inhale, murmuring words against her skin that bring a smile to Mom's face. I feel a tug in my heart watching them. It's been four years since I turned eighteen, but I still haven't found my mate. My werewolf college classmates assume it's because I'm cursed, and with each passing year, I can't help and fear they might be right, especially with my family's history. I know four years isn't a lot, but when everyone you grew up with is already mated, you feel like it's more. But I shouldn't be thinking about this tonight. It will sour my mood, and I don't want to ruin the night before it starts. I drive the thoughts away and correct Dad about something.

"Dad! We've had this conversation. You can't keep calling me baby girl. I'm twenty-two years old now. You should only address me by my name," I assert as we move away from the foot of the stairs, heading toward the ballroom in the castle where Dad's birthday dinner ball is being held.'

"I think I have the right to call you whatever I wish, my dear," he retorts with a smile. I huff and roll my eyes in response.

"Caleb's here," Mom interjects, and I turn around to see my elder brother walking toward us.

"Ready, everyone?" Caleb asks, linking his arms with mine once he reaches us by the ballroom entrance. Caleb is the spitting image of our father, except for his blond hair. The same blue eyes and muscular toned body, along with their shared alpha king aura that that sends everyone trembling.

"Yes," Mom answers and someone inside the ballroom announces our arrival.

The ballroom stands as a hall of magnificence, elegance, and beauty all rolled into one. Crystal chandeliers adorn the ceiling, casting a dazzling glow across the room. Tables and chairs grace

every corner, adorned with the finest foods on gleaming plates. Positioned ahead, a band awaits to resume playing the enchanting melody that had accompanied our entrance.

As we make our way through the regal space, heads bow in respectful greeting, acknowledging our presence. My father reciprocates with a gracious expression of gratitude, extending appreciation to all in the room. Once we reach the center, the live band seamlessly resumes playing classical tunes, and the crowd gracefully disperses, creating a sea of conversations and connections. The air is alive with the harmonious blend of music and socialization, creating an atmosphere of grand celebration.

"Where is your mate?" I inquire of Caleb as we walk around the room and away from our parents.

"With her mom," Caleb replies, grabbing a champagne flute from a passing waiter and taking one for me too.

"Is everything all right?" I ask, a touch of concern in my voice.

“Yes, Aunt Ekaterina just wants to ensure she and the baby are fine before she pops next week.”

“That’s good to hear.” I take a sip of my drink and scan the room. I get a few stares from my peers but can’t tell if they approve of what I'm wearing or not; but I don’t care. Some unmated younglings’ gazes linger a little too closely on my chest and thighs. I don’t know if I should be pleased that they think my body is worth staring at or insulted they have the guts to stare at all.

“Anything?” Caleb says, drawing my attention away from the crowd around me.

"Nope," I reply. Caleb is asking if my wolf picked up any unique scent that would mean my mate is here. Alphas bring their unmated to these events. I had been really hoping to find my mate tonight, but it seems that won't be the case.

"Don't worry, you will find him soon," Caleb reassures me with a small smile. I respond with a tight-lipped smile of my own and down the remainder of my drink. A peculiar taste lingers in my mouth after finishing the champagne. I stare at the glass, wondering if something was added to it. I don't feel drugged, but the taste is distinctly off.

"Does your drink taste funny?" I inquire, bringing my empty champagne flute to my nose. It smells normal. Hmm.

"No, why do you ask?" Caleb responds, glancing at his half-empty glass. I consider that I might be overthinking things. Maybe the

burrito I had for lunch is playing tricks on my taste buds.

"No reason. Let me go to the bar and get a refill. I'll be back," I inform him and start walking away.

"Sure."

As I make my way to the bar, I pass by my peers who are discussing the tardiness of the vampire king. Apparently, he is running late, and some speculate it might be intentional. I tend to agree; everything I've heard about him suggests a strong dislike for tardiness. I wonder why he would be late today. Upon reaching the bar, I place an order for my drink.

"Thank you," I say to the bartender as he hands me a glass of red wine.

I move away from the bar, scanning the room for my brother as I walk. Unable to find him, I head toward the back door to get some fresh air. Closing my eyes, I breathe in the cool night breeze, lifting my glass to take a sip, only for someone to snatch it out of my hand.

"A princess like you shouldn’t drink so much," a male voice says from my right. Recognizing the voice, I roll my eyes and turn to face him.

"Hello, Blake." I scowl, wondering what he wants. He wasn't my favorite person in the world, always trying to get into my pants. He doesn’t say anything, just stares at me from head to toe. His green eyes linger on my chest, and he licks his lips, making my skin crawl with disgust.

"You look beautiful tonight, princess," another voice says from my left. I was starting to wonder where his identical twin, Jake, had left himself. He was also my least favorite, following in his brother’s footsteps.

"Jake," I spit out, rolling my eyes at him.

"Hello, princess," Jake smiles, running his eyes over my body.

"Goodbye." I grab my drink from Blake's hand, but he doesn’t let go, causing my drink to spill on my dress.

"Shit! See what you've done!" I curse, anger building in my chest as I look at my ruined dress.

"C’mon now, princess, we didn’t mean for this to happen," Jake says, rubbing his hand on my chest in a foolish attempt to clean the stain but using it as an opportunity to touch me.

"Get your filthy hand off!" I slap his hand away, glaring at him. "Don't you dare touch me again."

"Ouch, princess. He only wanted to help," Blake says, and I just roll my eyes at them, walking away before I do something I'll regret. They always caused trouble when I saw them, and now, because of them, I had to change my beautiful dress. I look at the stained fabric as I walk back upstairs, sighing. Good thing I had two dresses picked out for tonight.

"Careful there, love," someone says, causing me to lift my eyes, realizing I was about to bump into them. My nose catches the strong smell of a vampire, but that's not what leaves me in a daze. The handsome vampire that just spoke in a British accent with blond hair and strands fanning his face is smiling down at me. As he pushes the hair back, revealing his grayish-blue eyes, I watch, transfixed. He's dressed the same way as Dad and Caleb, in a fitted tux.

"Miss?" he says, waving his hand across my face. I blink, my cheeks reddening with embarrassment.

"I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, dear," he replies, still smiling. I have to say he has such a lovely smile.

"Okay, bye," I say, attempting to run away from him but miss my footing. I teeter dangerously close to falling, but the handsome vampire catches me before I hit the ground. His warm arms envelop my waist, holding me firmly against him.

"You need to be careful, love," he says, his breath brushing my face, sending warmth through me.

"T-T-Thank you," I stammer, still trying to wrap my head around how I fit perfectly against his chest.

"You're welcome," he replies, still holding me in his arms, staring into my eyes. The air around us becomes thick with tension as I continue to remain in his arms, gazing back into his grayish-blue eyes. They reflect the smile I bet is grazing his lips right now.

"Princess, don't go like that. We didn't mean…" I hear Jake's voice trailing off as he runs toward us, but he stops short once he sees us. Realizing the position I'm in, I quickly pull away from the vampire.

"Eric," Blake says, eyes widening upon seeing the vampire.

Eric? Is that his name and do they know him, but how?

"Did you do this?" The vampire asks, pointing at the wine stain on my chest. The twins shake their heads, but Eric arches a brow at them. In the blink of an eye, they admit the truth.

“Love, I think I'll see you later. The boys and I need to chat,” Eric says, unwrapping his hand from my waist and walking toward the twins. In another blink, he grabs them, and they're all gone.

“Chat? What are you talking about?” I ask, spinning around, searching for where they went but can’t seem to figure it out. It feels like they just disappeared into thin air.

I remain frozen, confused by what just happened in the last few seconds—the intense encounter with the vampire and his peculiar reaction to the twins spilling wine on my dress. I don't know what's odder, but neither scenario makes sense. A thought roams my head wondering if he could have been my mate and that’s why I felt so comfortable in his arms, but Marie didn’t respond at all to his scent or being close to him. Hmm? I don’t think he is then. Deciding to leave it for now, I head to my room to change.

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CHAPTER TWO

"Done!" I exclaim into the wall of my room, grinning at my phone while letting my feet dangle in the air as I lie on my stomach. I've just finished the latest book in the Lord series by Shantel Tessier. When I got to my room, I had received a notification about its release and couldn't resist taking a peek, only to end up reading the whole thing.

Checking the time on the clock on my nightstand, my eyes widen. I didn't realize so much time had passed while I was engrossed in the story. Hastily, I shoot out of bed, heading to my closet to change. I hope the party isn't already over.

I slip into a colorful flowing line of embroidery, a strapless pink tulle dress with a twisted, draped bust. Stepping out of the closet, I check my phone for any missed calls from my family, and to my utmost surprise, there are none. I've been gone for a while, so I'm a little shocked they haven't called asking where I was. I try Caleb's cell to ask him how the party is going, but it goes straight to voicemail. Attempting a mind link, I get no response. Maybe he's busy with his mate or something and has closed his link, not wanting to be disturbed. I quickly put on my shoes and head to the ballroom, praying that Dad and Mom won't have my head for disappearing for so long.

As I make my way to the ballroom, an intoxicating scent assaults my senses, a potent blend of earthy notes that transport me to the heart of the rainforest. It's unlike anything I've ever smelled, so much so that it immediately triggers Marie, my wolf, to open our connection.

“Oh heavens, it’s happening,” she exclaims, her excitement mirroring my own.

"Do you truly believe he's here?" I inquire, a surge of anticipation

pulsating through my veins, urging me to hasten my steps. The prospect of discovering his identity sparks my curiosity. Is he the son of an alpha, or could he be an alpha himself? The excitement building within me threatens to overflow.

"Yes, it's becoming more potent, Amelia. Pick up the pace," Marie urges, seizing control and guiding me forward.

"Finally," I breathe with a mixture of relief and excitement as I swing the door open to the ballroom.

A guttural scream tears through me the moment I swing the door open. Time stands still as I freeze, my gaze fixated on the floor transformed into a morbid canvas of crimson. The edge of my dress swiftly becomes saturated, the sheer volume of blood evident everywhere. Oh, heavens! What in the world is happening? The shock courses through me, a surreal disconnection between the blissful anticipation of finding my mate and the horrifying reality before my eyes.

I can't fathom how I missed the smell of blood on my way over. But how could I have? My senses were ensnared by the alluring fragrance of my mate, leaving me oblivious to the pervasive stench of blood saturating the ballroom.

"Amelia, run, get out of here!" Dad's desperate scream forces my gaze upward. The scene that unfolds is a nightmare etched in crimson—a sea of vampires, mouths, and bodies adorned with blood. My heart sinks as I hazard a guess that some of that blood belongs to the werewolves strewn across the floor. Yet, that is only the surface of the horror.

A vampire, distinguishable among the blood-soaked crowd, drives his claws into Dad's chest with lethal intent, aiming for his heart. But this isn't just any vampire; it's my...

"Mate," Marie and I utter in unison, our eyes widening at the shocking truth. The weight of the revelation hangs heavily in the air.

"Run, Amelia, run," Dad pleads once more, his voice a desperate echo.

My mate turns away from my father, his eyes lock onto mine. The anger in his gaze is unlike anything I've ever witnessed, sending a shiver down my spine. My hair stands on end as he leisurely digs his claws deeper, savoring the gruesome act of extracting my father's heart.

My own heart clenches in my chest, disbelief and horror

intertwining within me. This can't be happening—my mate is killing my father, the very person I've been yearning for all these years. In this harrowing moment, the belief that I am cursed takes root within me. Tears well up, blurring my vision, but now is not the time for despair.

I shake my head, pushing the tears back. This is the moment to act, to save my father, even if it means confronting and hurting the very mate I've been longing for. Ignoring the conflicting emotions within me, and with a steely mind, I take decisive action.

“No!” Marie's agonized scream echoes through my head as I swiftly transform into my white wolf, leaping through the air and charging at my mate. In a sudden, jarring halt, I crash to the ground, creating a deep dent in the marble floor of the ballroom, whimpering in searing pain. I don't need to be told to realize that a witch must be manipulating my fate, halting the flow of my blood to my heart.

Without a moment's hesitation, I revert to my human form, disregarding the vulnerability of my nakedness in the presence of vampires. The urgency to save my father eclipses any concern for modesty. My instincts kick in, and I snatch a nearby tablecloth, sending cups and plates crashing to the ground as I hastily wrap it around my body.

I pant, facing my mate, chest heaving with rapid breaths. Tremors course through my body as I lock eyes with him. The weight of the impending actions I am about to take hangs heavily in the air, but there's no choice—I'm outnumbered, and saving my father demands drastic measures.

With a determined resolve, I prepare myself for the unthinkable, knowing it's the only recourse to save my father in this dire moment. "Please, stop!" I cry out, collapsing to my knees. The gasp that ripples through the room is ignored; nothing eclipses the urgency of saving my father, not even my pride and honor as a princess.

"I command you to stand this minute, Amelia! Never kneel for the enemy!" Dad yells, but I remain steadfast, ignoring him.

"Please," I beg again, bowing my head in submission. I clench my fists, forcing my body to hold its position. My own claws dig into my skin, blood trickling down to the floor. In that moment, I notice severed heads around me and a vast pool of blood beneath my

knees—hearts ripped out of chests, some drained pale. The gruesome sight overwhelms me, and I can't hold back the wave of nausea that rises, expelling my dinner onto the blood-decorated floor. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, lifting my head to meet the gaze of my mate. I wish I hadn't, for in the blink of an eye, I'm lifted off the ground, the back of my head colliding with a wall as my mate presses me into it, hands tightening around my neck.

My eyes widen in terror as the stark reality sets in—he's choking me. Unbelievably, my own mate is laying hands on me, attempting to end my life. The struggle for breath intensifies, and panic takes hold as I grapple with the realization that the one I had longed for has turned into a threat, and I am fighting for my own survival.

With adrenaline surging through me, I hastily position my hand above his, attempting to pry his fingers away as my legs kick desperately in the air. I feel sparks as our skin touches, but I couldn't care less because, in a matter of seconds, he would choke me to death.

"Another one," he snarls in a thick British accent, his eyes ablaze with hatred, their red hue indicating the recent consumption of someone's blood. My heart clenches at the realization that it must have been one of my people, or worse, my mother, lying unconscious beside my brother. The weight of the loss crashes over me, and my lower lip quivers as I begin to sob. I can't comprehend that they are gone too.

I tear my eyes away from the gruesome scene around me, the pressure around my neck escalating. Desperation fuels my struggle to free myself, nails digging into his hands in a futile attempt to loosen the grip, even if it means drawing blood. His hands remain unyielding, a vise around my throat. With each passing second, my access to air diminishes, and my lungs plead for oxygen. The struggle for breath is becoming more desperate by the moment.

Determined to find a way out, I decide to appeal to the mate bond. Locking eyes with him, I plead silently, hoping the connection between us will stir some compassion. Instead, the opposite occurs. I feel my soul slowly slipping away, the veins on my face threatening to burst at any moment.

“You could have looked like anyone else,” he seethes, tightening his grip with knuckles whitening further. “Any fucking one.” The pressure intensifies, my face growing paler. It's unfathomable that

my mate, the one bound to me by fate, is on the brink of taking my life. “Why the fuck did it have to be you with this face?” he roars, releasing his grip abruptly, flinging me across the room.

My body collides with chairs and tables, the impact shattering them in my chaotic descent. A thud resonates as I finally land, every inch of my body aching and blistered from the force of the throw. Blood fills my lungs, and I involuntarily spit it out, coughing violently over the blood-stained floor. Gasping for air, I wipe my mouth clean and glance up, only to see him approaching with an unrestrained fury that causes the ground to vibrate beneath his forceful strides. The sight sends a shiver down my spine. The rattling of chairs and tables echoes the intensity of his rage. Panic sets in, and my survival instincts kick in. I scramble to find anything that could serve as a makeshift weapon, fully aware that I can't shift and unmasking my scent would jeopardize my safety. In this moment of dire vulnerability, I cling to the hope that a weapon will provide the defense I need.

With great effort, I spot a plank of wood nearby and start to crawl toward it, the blood-slicked floor making every movement challenging. Despite the difficulty, I inch forward, determined to reach the potential makeshift weapon. However, before I can grasp it, Nickolas intercepts me. My fingers barely brush the plank as he seizes me by the back of my neck, lifting me off the ground. Panic sets in, and I struggle in his grip, screaming for him to release me.

The desperate pleas pause as the unmistakable sounds of crashing waves fill the air. A sudden realization strikes—a witch is teleporting here.

My mate releases his grip, and I plummet to the ground with a resounding thud. Agony courses through my body as I bite down on my bottom lip, attempting to stifle the pain. Amid the suffering, a chilling realization seizes me, draining all color from my face. Only one witch could be teleporting right now.

"Go back!" I scream desperately at Alissa, Caleb's mate and my best friend, a half-witch and werewolf. She must have felt the anguish of her mate's death and rushed to our location. However, my plea comes too late, and Alissa materializes.

"Caleb!" she screams, rushing to his side on the ground. I catch a glimpse from my peripheral vision of my mate sprinting toward them, and I unleash the loudest scream of my life.

"Alissa, shield now!" The urgency in my voice resonates through

the room, my throat burning as the words echo loudly. Confusion etches Alissa's face as her eyes dart to me, but she reacts swiftly upon seeing my mate dangerously close to grabbing her. Instantly, she erects a transparent shield around herself, my brother, and my parents. The impact sends my mate hurtling backward, crashing into chairs and tables with each contact. The room vibrates with the force of the collision.

A breath of relief escapes my lips, imagining the catastrophic outcome if Alissa hadn't reacted swiftly enough to shield herself from my mate. The haunting thought sends a shiver down my spine, and I forcefully shake it away, unwilling to dwell on the grim possibilities.

“What’s going on?” Alissa asks, her horrified eyes scanning the gruesome scene around her.

“It appears the vampire lied to us. They never wanted peace between our kinds. They just needed a way to enter the castle without being stopped. You need to leave now! Please leave.” It didn't take me long to put two and two together.

“I can’t leave you,” she responds, her voice laden with emotion, as my mate relentlessly pounds on the shield surrounding her.

“I will be fine. He’s my mate,” I assure her, only to be interrupted by a sudden fit of coughing that expels blood, my ribs aching in pain.

Alissa's eyes widen in terror. “No!”

“I will be fine. Don’t worry.”

“He looks like he will kill you, Amelia. Come closer so we can go together.”

“I can’t. Once you take down that shield, we both know what’s gonna happen. Leave now before he breaks the shield. You’re not strong enough to hold on for long. Leave!” I scream, witnessing the shield around her rattle as my mate continues to assault it relentlessly.

“I will come back for you, Amelia. Wait for me,” Alissa says, tears streaming down her face. She creates a portal and pulls my brother through it, returning for my father and mother. Returning one last time, she says, “Wait for me,” and then closes the portal.

An earth-shattering growl, unimaginable for a vampire, erupts through the room, almost cracking the walls. I press my palm into the ground to steady myself. Lifting my eyes, I lock them with those of my mate, the source of the primal growl. He stares at me,

panting hard, his eyes burning into my very soul. I don't dare to test if the mate bond could quell his rage, and I begin to crawl away, holding my stomach, knowing escape is my only chance at survival.

My escape attempt fails miserably as my mate seizes me by the hair, his fingers tight and unyielding as he lifts me off the ground. Pain shoots through my scalp as he turns me to face him, his grip intensifying. I flinch at the overwhelming rage emanating from him. In this proximity, I can take in his features without the threat of imminent danger.

His emerald-colored eyes, filled with fury, captivate me, revealing a breathtaking beauty beneath the rage. Long, full lashes fan his face. His features are meticulously shaped—a straight nose full and perfectly arched brows. He appears to be in his late thirties or early forties. Despite the fury and brutality, there's no denying the undeniable truth – he is the most handsome man I had ever laid my eyes on.

“You will pay for that, bitch,” he seethes, his plump lips decorated with someone's blood.

"I'm not sorry," I defiantly spit out.

"You will be," he vows, and with a sudden, brutal twist, he snaps my neck, sending me into unconsciousness.

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CHAPTER THREE

NICKOLAS

I walk to my room, my footsteps leaving a trail of blood as it drips from my clothes. One of the witches in my army just teleported us back to my territory. My room is dimly lit, with moonlight slipping through the dark curtains, casting shadows across the walls. A king-sized bed, draped in luxurious gray linens and white pillows, sits in the center of the room. To the left of the bed, a large fireplace stands tall, with a comfortable armchair and ottoman sitting nearby. A large desk sits in one corner, covered in papers, where I spend many long hours working to bring the vampire kingdom back to its glory. I take off my shirt, sighing, annoyed with how everything played out tonight.

"Fuck!" I roar, throwing my shirt to the floor. I can't believe that bastard Nathaniel got away after everything I fucking did to make sure I could kill him tonight and finally avenge my father. And to make matters worse, he was able to get away because of his daughter, who turned out to be my mate. My insides churn as I call her my mate.

After thousands of years of believing I was cursed to walk this earth alone, the universe decided to prove me wrong and fucking gave me the werewolf princess as a mate. What the fuck?

"We will get him next time," someone says as they enter my room.

"Who the fuck dares enter without knocking?" I retort, swiftly spinning around and thanking heavens I haven't taken off my vest. It's one of the reasons I even wear it underneath my shirts for situations like this. I can't fucking have people seeing what they aren't supposed to.

"That's no way to speak to your uncle, boy," Uncle Leo says, walking up to me.

“Hello, Uncle,” I greet, discarding my pants and tossing them onto the same pile as my shirt.

"Today, your father would be standing here, proud," Uncle Leo asserts, his hand finding a place on my shoulder, squeezing in reassurance.

"But that bastard still breathes," I retort, the frustration evident in my voice.

“As I said, we will get him next time. You have his daughter. Once he recovers, he will definitely come for her. And then we will get him.”

“Let’s not forget his daughter is my ma...” I suck in a breath, my fists clenching as my tongue feels heavy, refusing to acknowledge her as my mate. She might be, but I will never accept her.

I’m not surprised he knows everything, even though we just returned. Ava, his mate and queen of witches, must’ve made it possible for him to watch what was happening while we were there. He would have been there if he had his way, but I couldn’t risk it. I had already lost my father. I couldn’t bear something happening to him, so I asked him to stay and guard the kingdom while I was away.

Uncle Leo remains silent, his gaze filled with pity as he looks at me. "Not you too, stop," I growl, the memory of Eric's sad eyes upon hearing Amelia say “mate” echoing in my mind.

"I can’t help it," he responds, his voice softening. "You’ve been mateless for centuries, and then your mate ends up being a descendant of Jane. Her being Nathaniel’s daughter isn’t even as fucked up as that."

I sigh, running a hand stained with dried blood through my dark hair. "I need to shower," I say, tired of having this conversation.

"I'll be home if you need me," Uncle Leo states, exiting my room.

As I prepare to remove my vest, the door creaks open, causing me to pause. I expect to see Uncle Leo walking back in, but I see someone else.

"How many times have I told you to fucking knock?" I growl, relieved I hadn't removed my vest yet.

Ember, using vampire speed, appears before me in a blink of an eye. "Thank heavens you’re fine," she says, disregarding my complaint and staring at my face as she rests her hand on my arms stained with blood.

“You can see I’m fine, so you can leave.” I swap her hand off my

arm.

“I missed you, baby.” Ember touches my face with her long nails and runs her hands through my hair. “Are you about to shower, my love? Why don't I join you?” she asks, stepping back and moving her hand to the strap of her dress.

"Ember…" My words get choked in my throat as her dress drops to the ground, revealing her naked body underneath. My dick pulses. I fucking hate the bitch, but I couldn't deny she had the body that could bring men to their knees.

"You were saying, baby," Ember teases, closing the distance between us, sliding her hand to my waist, and lowering my boxers. She grabs my dick, and I groan.

"Ember," I moan as she begins to stroke my slowly hardening dick.

"Yes, baby," she responds, gradually descending to the ground, positioning her mouth at my throbbing dick. I halt her midway, seizing her arm and lifting her off the ground. I wasn't in the mood for foreplay right now. I needed to fuck after how messed up today went. Spinning her around, I bend her forward. I see her pussy pooling with her wetness already. I haven’t even touched the bitch, but only the thought of me fucking her has her wet. I begin to position my dick at her entrance when suddenly a pair of baby-blue eyes filled with tears flash in my mind.

“You’ve got to be kidding me?” I mutter, closing my eyes in an attempt to drive away the image of them, but they only intensify. I see her whole body that has all the curves in the right places. Her tiny tits but perfect for her size, and her big round ass. Fuck! I pinch the bridge of my nose, cursing the heavens for that stupid thing called the mate bond. Why the hell am I thinking about her now?

"Is everything alright?" Ember inquires. I open my eyes to find her facing me.

"Get out!" I bark.

"Did I do something wrong?" she questions, confusion etched on her face.

"No, just leave."

"Baby, please tell me what I've done wrong. I don't like it when you're angry with me," she pleads, placing her hands on my arms and searching my eyes for an explanation.

I release her hands from my arms. "Nothing, just leave." Stepping away, I head toward my bathroom door.

"Should I come by later?" she queries, trailing behind me.

"No!" I retort, entering the bathroom and slamming the door in her face, ignoring her questioning pleas.

AMELIA

I open my eyes to find myself in a pitch-black room. Sitting on the cold concrete floor, I wince as my muscles ache. My hand instinctively moves to my neck and then my ribs, where I feel the most pain. The bruises haven't healed. Switching my eyes to my werewolf vision to survey the room, I find that I can't. My brows furrow in confusion. I try contacting Marie and get a whimper in response; a sinking realization hits me—they must have injected silver into my bloodstream.

I don't need someone to tell me where I am. I remember everything like it just happened a minute ago. Tears well up in my eyes, remembering the state I last saw my family. I hope they are okay. Wiping the tear that escapes my eye, I try to focus my mind on getting out of here.

I quickly unmask my scent and wait for my body to regain strength. The ability to mask my scent is one of the many gifts inherited from Mom, a skill that took my entire childhood to master. I vividly recall how I couldn't even attend school until I could successfully conceal my true scent. Tears well up as childhood memories flood my mind, but I forcefully push them aside—now isn't the time to delve into the past.

Sniffling, I attempt to stand up, but my body betrays me, and I drop back to the cold floor, the impact reverberating through my drained muscles. Eyes closed, I grimace as the ache intensifies. Something feels off, and confusion sets in as I look around the dark room, my vision becoming hazy. Panic surges within me—what have they done to me?

“Mask your scent if you don't want to die in the next few seconds,” a voice commands as the lights flicker on in the room, prompting me to tightly shut my eyes. The thick British accent sounds eerily familiar, but in my weakened state, I can't spare the energy to contemplate where I know it from.

My heart pounds violently in my chest, each beat sending pulses of pain through my body. Breathing becomes a struggle, my breaths coming out in short, labored pants. The sudden pain in my heart only intensifies the growing sense of dread. "I can't breathe," I rasp

out, my words barely above a whisper, feeling my heart tighten.

"Do as I fucking asked, and you will!" the person commands, and I comply. Gasping, I fill my lungs with air, panting hard. I didn't do it initially because I didn't think it would help.

Slowly I open my eyes and sit up to see the person who saved me. My eyes widen in terror, seeing that it's my mate and he definitely didn't save me. Instead, he kept me alive for whatever he plans to do to me. I back away from him as he stands a foot away. I hit the wall and jump in fright. My heart pounds as he stares down at me. He has proven to me that he can hurt me. I just pray I go away without too much pain.

Silent, he stares at me with eyes brimming with hatred, scrutinizing every inch of my dirt-covered body from being on the floor. I observe that he has freshened up, shedding the bloodstained clothes. I remember earlier how his white button-up was drenched in the blood of my family and people. My heart aches, tears welling up in my eyes. It's disheartening that this will forever be my initial image of him.

Pushing back the tears in my eyes, I lock gazes with him, maintaining eye contact as I question, "What did you do to me?"

“I know what you are, so don't fucking try to unmask your scent again,” he says, his British accent evident as he speaks. He completely ignores my question. I’ve always loved the British accent, but now it sends a shiver down my spine whenever I hear it, and not in a good way.

“Do you wish to kill me?” I ask.

“Why the fuck do you have that face?” He snaps, clenching his jaw. Confused, I touch my face, wondering if something is wrong with it. I won’t say I'm the finest person in the world, but I don’t think my face is unappealing.

“You could’ve fucking looked like anyone. Why the fuck did you have to look like her?” He roars with an anger that makes me flinch. I recall he said something similar in the ballroom. Was there something I was missing?

“I don’t know,” I reply, unsure.

“You don’t know, you don’t fucking know,” he barks, crouching to my eye level. I instinctively retreat, the cold wall scraping against my skin as I press back into it. My eyes shut, shielding me from the intensity of his anger. The palpable fury makes me clench my dress tightly, the fabric almost tearing beneath my fingers.

Amidst the turmoil, a sense of sorrow seeps into my heart, realizing I'm the unwitting source of such rage in my mate. I wonder what I did to be cursed to be mated to someone like him.

His scent envelops me, filling my nose, and like magic, my fists loosen around my dress. My body relaxes. I'm not surprised. Terrified as I may be of him, he is still my mate, and his scent will always do that to me.

I begin to slowly pull my eyes open when suddenly he curses, punching the wall closest to my head. The impact shatters the barrier, and a storm of debris settles around me. I freeze, my body stiffening as my heart begins to hammer violently against my chest. Did he mean to hit me but missed? The chilling thought sends a shiver down my spine, and in that moment, I scream. His callous hand forces its way into my hair, clenching it in a vice-like grip.

"Open your fucking eyes, dog," his growl echoes in my face, and I comply. My tear-filled eyes met his. The hurt of being labeled the ultimate insult to a werewolf by my own mate pierces deeper than mere insult. I should be offended, but instead, I feel a profound sense of hurt.

"I'm going to give you one chance, one fucking chance to tell me where your family is," he declares, his mesmerizing green eyes locked onto mine.

Swallowing hard, I muster a response. "I don't know where they are." Despite knowing, I won't divulge their location.

"Amelia!" he growls, intensifying his grip on my hair.

"I don't know," I repeat, still refusing to give them up.

Releasing my hair, he stands tall. "You asked for this," he declares, his towering figure casting an intimidating shadow.

Pausing at the cell door, he delivers a final warning. "You will wish you told me the truth by the time she's done with you." With that, he exits, leaving me haunted by questions about the mysterious "she."

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CHAPTER FOUR

I walk around the room, searching for anything to help me pick the lock on my cell door. It's made of silver, so trying to break it down is out of the option. My actions suddenly halt, hearing the cell door squeak open. I whip my head toward the door, praying in my heart my mate isn't back to make good on his threat. I exhale when I get a different scent than his as the lights come on in the room. Eric and a woman with an herby scent tread into the room. The woman must be a water witch. Most of them are healers and deal with a lot of herbs. Witches are grouped by elements of nature, fire, water, earth, and air. They cast spells based on which element they are gifted with.

"Hi, Amelia," Eric greets. I remain silent, my gaze fixed on him and the water witch at his side, trying to decipher why they are here. My mate mentioned a woman would make me regret not disclosing where my family might be hiding. Is this water witch the woman he was talking about? As I said, most of them are healers, but they are also one of the deadliest witches out there.

Eric's voice carries a touch of concern as he approaches me, navigating the edges of the room. I instinctively step back, maintaining a wary distance. My attention might have been mainly on my mate in the ballroom earlier, but I saw him too, streaked with blood on his body from head to toe and alphas' decapitated heads around him. We might have had an intense moment earlier that night, but it doesn't change the fact that he is the enemy.

"How are you feeling?" he inquires, his concern seemingly genuine. I raise an eyebrow, skeptical of his sudden care. He didn't hesitate to take lives earlier, so why express concern for mine? "I understand why you would be wary of me, but I don’t wish to harm you, Amelia," he asserts, attempting to reassure me. I meet his gaze,

skeptical about his gentle behavior toward me. He didn’t have a problem killing my people, so why should he care about me?

"Why are you here then?" I question, my tone holding a hint of suspicion.

He sighs before responding, "I am here to ensure you are prepared for what’s coming."

“What’s coming?” I press, shifting my gaze between Eric and the water witch by his side.

"You will find out very soon. Have a look at her, Hillary," Eric instructs the water witch. She approaches me, but I instinctively move away, keeping a safe distance on the other side of the wall.

“Don’t come close to me,” I warn, uncertainty clouding my thoughts. I don’t know what’s going on, but I don’t want any witch around me right now. She could be trying to kill me for all I know.

“Amelia, she’s only trying to check on you. She doesn’t wish to harm you,” Eric reassures, closing the distance between us. Despite his assurances, I continue retreating from them.

“Why?” I question, baffled by their sudden interest in my well-being. It seems counterintuitive for those responsible for my injuries to now express concern about my health.

“We don’t want you to die when she comes,” Eric states, mentioning a “she” as Nicholas did.

“When who comes?” I demand, my steps grinding to a halt.

"You will find out soon,” Eric says, abruptly seizing my hand. I tug my hand out of his, attempting to pull away, but his grip is unyielding.

I can't fathom why, but his words are challenging to believe. My mate isn't one to treat my wounds out of kindness, and he certainly won't use this approach to get information from me. Something feels off, and I'm left puzzled about what might be happening.

"I could sedate her with magic," the water witch suggests, positioned a few feet away.

"No! Stay the hell away from me!" I scream, desperation mounting. I struggle against Eric's grasp, determined to resist whatever they have planned. However, my efforts prove futile as he shoves me against the wall, securing me in place. The water witch conjures liquid from a bottle, muttering incantations for a spell. In moments, she douses my face with the enchanted water, and darkness envelops me once more.

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Opening my eyes with a jolt, I take in the dimly lit room, grappling to understand my surroundings. A pang of disappointment settles in as I realize I'm still in the same cold and dimly lit space. For a second, I wished everything was a very elaborate bad dream that I could finally wake up from. As I gather my bearings, I sense something on my ribs and back. Lifting my dress, I discover bandages there. It strikes me—they genuinely treated my wounds. The question lingers: why?

"Welcome back." Eric's voice reaches me from a few feet away. Hastily getting to my feet, I regret the decision as my body wobbles, nearly causing me to fall. Eric, with his vampire speed, swiftly catches me, preventing a mishap.

"You still have some of the silver in your system. You shouldn't try to move around too much."

I shove at his chest to create some distance as a headache starts to form. Closing my eyes, I massage my temples to alleviate the pain. The thought crosses my mind: did they treat my wounds only to gift me a nasty headache in return?

"Sorry about that; it's to make sure everything goes well," he apologizes, remaining uncomfortably close.

"I don't know what games you are playing, but it won't work. I will never tell you where my family is," I assert, brushing off the throbbing in my head.

"Games? We haven't even done anything yet." Confusion evident in his voice. I open my eyes, locking gazes with him.

"Then how do you explain what's going on now?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he asks, chuckling. My brows knit together.

"You know what I'm talking about," I grit out, my head pounding with every passing second. I search the room for the witch who treated me. I need to have a word with her. Who the hell treats someone's wounds and gives them a bad headache in return?

"No, I don't."

"You do."

"He doesn't, and if you would just fucking calm down, the headache will stop," someone says from outside the cell. A whiff of rainforest hits my nose, and my blood runs cold. He's here.

With every step he takes, my heart pounds. I retreat from Eric

further into the room as his footsteps draw closer and closer until he's in front of me. I gasp, finding myself face to face with the most exquisite emerald eyes I had ever seen but also the most terrifying. He used his vampire speed to close the distance between us in a matter of milliseconds.

"Be calm," he commands, in that thick British accent that makes any word that rolls out of his mouth the sexiest thing a man could ever say. I breathe in his scent, and a wave of warmth surges through my bones, and my headache starts to subside instantly. I hate that his scent can do that to me.

"Why is my head hurting after getting treated?" I ask, tilting my head back as I speak to him. He's so tall.

"Side effects of the drug," he replies, moving away from me and approaching the door.

"What drug?"

"None of your concern."

"What do you plan to do with me?" I inquire.

"You are about to find out," he replies and walks out, leaving me more confused than I was minutes ago.

I turn to Eric, about to ask him to explain when the clicking of someone's heels outside my cell halts me. A beautiful redhead in her late forties or early fifties with brown eyes steps into the room. She sets her sights on me, and they light up, staring at me. I look at her, wondering why she's so happy to see me even though I have no clue who she is.

"Your Highness," Eric says, bowing his head. All the color drains from my face as my eyes widen in terror—a redhead queen. There is only one person she could be.

"Hello, princess," Ava, the queen of witches says, her voice dripping with a sinister sweetness. Her lips, painted in a bold red hue, stretch into a big grin, revealing pearl-white teeth. Clad in a red pantsuit that matches her lipstick, with black heels adding a touch of elegance, she exudes an air of confidence and power. One look at her and it's evident that red is her favorite color.

She moves toward me, an evil smile playing on her lips. Ava places her long, black-painted fingers on my chin, forcing my head to move from side to side.

"You might have your mother's hair and face, but your eyes," she remarks with a disdainful click of her tongue. "Those are Becky's," she adds, digging her nail into my chin, threatening to draw blood,

before abruptly flipping my face to the side.

I pant, my heart pounding, fearing my death was near. There is no one on earth that Ava hates more than Becky, my late fraternal grandmother. Becky was the one who killed Ava's mate.

Ava turns away from me, directing her attention to Eric.

"Do you mind giving us some privacy before we start?" Ava requests, her voice carrying a chilling tone.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Eric replies. Thank heavens, he is not leaving me alone with this monstrous witch. Despite my mother resurrecting Ava's mate, Leo, I know Ava still holds a deep-seated grudge against Grandma Becky for massacring half her kind while searching for her.

"I promise I only wish to speak to the child and nothing more," Ava insists.

"Nick gave strict instructions not to leave the two of you alone," Eric pushes back.

"I know, dear." She moves closer to Eric, her hand gently resting on his shoulder as she locks eyes with him. "I promise I won't do anything." Eric's Adam's apple bobs as he attempts to maintain eye contact with Ava.

"I will be outside," Eric says, stepping back, causing her hand to drop from his shoulder. He turns to leave the cell, but not before stealing a fleeting glance at me, his eyes filled with an unmistakable pity.

"Good," she says, turning away from him and fixing her malicious gaze back on me.

"Do you know something, dear?" Ava inquires, circling around me, her footsteps resounding off the walls.

"No," I reply, desperately hoping my voice doesn't betray the fear that consumed me, anticipating whatever cruel intentions she had in store.

"Nick has asked me to force your mind to tell me where your family might be," she whispers behind me, sending a cold shiver down my spine. I whip my head around to face her, but she vanishes when I turn. The lights in the room go off, and I'm plunged into utter darkness. My heart pounds as I catch her scent and feel her breath on me, intensifying the dread within me as I remain unable to see her in the pitch-black room.

"Isn't that forbidden magic?" I ask, spinning around the room as I try to find her. I finally realize why I was treated and what drug

might have been given to me. They wanted to ensure I didn't die while she controlled my mind. Forbidden magic! It's so strong it could shatter someone's mind if they are not physically and mentally strong.

"It is, my dear," she says, placing a cold finger on my shoulder, causing me to jump in fright. I try to steady my heartbeat as her long nail remains on my shoulder. The best way to throw off your enemy is to show no fear. I chat in my head but find it hard to do with the situation right now.

"Then don't do it," I plead, even though I know it's futile. My heart leaps out of my chest as a sinister laughter reverberates off the walls. The cold touch of her finger is replaced by haunting darkness and laughter.

"I can see your mother has told you nothing about me. Why don't I introduce myself then?" she says, conjuring a ball of fire that vanishes into my body. A scream tears through me as I burn from within, my blood boiling. Collapsing to the ground, I convulse, tears filling my eyes.

"Nick might not have asked me to use this method, but I believe he would be pleased regardless if I get the same result."

In a desperate plea, I manage, "Please st..." My breath hitches, panting heavily as my fingers struggle to clutch my dress, a futile attempt to absorb the searing pain emanating from within. Before I can utter another word, a pained groan escapes me. The scorching bones in my fingers twist at odd angles, causing me to widen my eyes in horror, whimpering through the pain.

"Tell me where your family is, and I might stop," she demands, callously tearing open the skin on my arm with a blade made from her fire magic. Using that same magic, she turns the blade into a hand and wrenches every burning bone in my body. They snap like twigs, my face contorting in unimaginable pain. A scream erupts from my throat as the intensity of the agony surpasses anything I've ever felt. Blood flows from the cuts, staining the floor and soiling my dress. I'm going to die here tonight.

"Please stop; I don’t know," I cry out, tears streaming down my face. Despite the unbearable agony, I refuse to disclose where my family might be hiding. Revealing their location would seal their fate. I can't allow that. My heart aches at the thought of them surviving the initial attack only to meet their demise because of my words. No, I must stay strong. I bite down hard on my bottom lip,

attempting to divert my mind from the pain. The taste of metal fills my mouth as I bite with all my might.

"Stop wasting my time and quickly tell me," Ava growls, abruptly lifting me off the ground using magic. I scream, thrashing in the air, praying gravity doesn't take its merciless course.

"I don't know," I reply, looking down, an immediate wave of regret washing over me. My head spins as the ground seems bottomless.

"Suit yourself then," Ava utters indifferently. She drops me to the ground as though I weigh nothing. The impact rattles the earth, my skull almost fracturing, but a pounding headache surges through my head. In that moment, I realize Ava is determined to end my life, and I choose to die for my family. I can't betray them.

Ava repeats the question multiple times, demanding the whereabouts of my family, but I refuse to yield. Eventually, she ceases her inquiries and gazes down at me on the floor, wearing a satisfied smile akin to an artist admiring their masterpiece.

My breath escapes in short pants, tears blending with the sweat streaks on my face, a macabre mixture with my own blood. Every inch of my body throbs with pain—from the inside out. The wounds are infected, bits of concrete particles that broke from my body, hitting the ground. I sob, gazing aimlessly at the ceiling, grappling with the perplexing question of how the hell I was still alive. "Now, let's put you back together." Ava meticulously places every twisted bone in my body back in its original position and expertly seals the fresh cuts she inflicted. Lying in my own pool of blood, I continue to stare at the ceiling, the echoes of her departing heels reverberating in my ears. Those few minutes felt like an eternity, each bone crack and wound seal inducing unimaginable pain. In those horrifying moments, I found myself wishing for death a hundred times over.

"Amelia," someone says, rushing into the room. I turn my head to the side and see it's Eric. Horror fills his eyes as he takes in the sight of the blood pooling around me. "What did she do to you?" he asks, his gaze fixed on me. I turn my head away, curling into a ball, bringing my knees to my chest. This is the cruel toll of being mated to a vampire. Quivers rack my body as wails tear out of me. I'm destined to die here, and my mate won't even intervene.

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I stir awake, groaning in pain as my body aches like it was engulfed in flames. Actually, it was, internally. Surveying my surroundings, I find myself on a bed, my blood-soaked clothes replaced. The last memory etched in my mind is crying in a pool of blood, with Eric attempting to communicate with me.

I sit up cautiously, mindful of the bandages adorning my body. Ava sealed my wounds, but they were not properly done. Now, they are cleaned and properly bandaged. I strain my ears for any heartbeat besides mine. Marie is still unconscious due to lingering silver in my body, but I still have my werewolf abilities. They are just not as good as they would be if she were awake. I hear no heartbeat other than mine. I listen harder, my focus outside the room, but nothing. I decide to take the chance to try and escape from here before Ava decides to come back and finish the job. It's suspicious that there's no guard at my door, but I don't think anything worse can happen if I'm caught, so it is worth trying.

Dropping my feet to the bed's edge, I place my hand on the nightstand. Despite my protesting muscles, I muster the strength to stand, only to find my legs betraying me. I collapse to the floor, the nightstand's contents scattering as I struggle for support.

"Amelia!" Eric exclaims, entering the room. I gaze at him from the floor, immobile, my body protesting against the additional pain caused by my attempt to stand. Eric hurriedly picks me up, gently placing me back on the bed.

"Your body has barely healed. You shouldn't try that again," he cautions, tucking me under the covers. I remain silent, studying him, perplexed by his seemingly caring demeanor. What game is he playing? Why the pretense of concern when he likely plans to aid my mate in my demise?

"Why?" I inquire.

“Why what?” he responds.

“Why pretend you care if I'm well taken care of when you plan to help my mate dispose of me sooner or later?” He hesitates, swallowing hard, his Adam's apple bobbing.

“I will let His Majesty know you’re awake,” Eric says, ignoring my question and heading toward the door.

“His Majesty?” I interrupt, stopping him before he can open the door.

“Yes, your mate,” he replies, turning to face me. My eyes widen.

“You’re joking,” I laugh drily, staring at him in disbelief.

“Why would I?”

“You're telling me Nickolas Adams II is my mate?”

“Yes.”

I burst into louder, more bitter laughter, tears welling in my eyes. “What’s so funny?” Eric inquires.

“What’s so funny?” I wipe away escaping tears, locking my eyes with Eric. “I thought I had a chance of surviving this place until I found a way to escape. Now, I believe that will never happen because if Nickolas Adams II is my fucking mate, you might as well bury me now.”

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CHAPTER FIVE

No vampire on Earth harbors a deeper grudge against my family than Nickolas. My dad was responsible for killing his father. The only reason he suggested a peace treaty was due to his concern for the potential extinction of his people. This concern arose from the war the late vampire king waged against werewolves, or at least that's what he led us to believe. In recent years, werewolf numbers have surged and terrorized vampires due to their numerical advantage, which I believe was allowed intentionally to mislead us. Nickolas requested a peace treaty, claiming the need to end the slaughter of his people, regardless of his desire to see my father's head.

When I'd entered the ballroom, I didn't immediately guess "Nickolas" was my mate. He exuded authority, and I presumed him to be the king's general, not the king himself. I recognized his high rank due to the distinctive red eyes of an original vampire when he consumed blood. Originals, impervious to the sun's burn, typically belonged to the royal family, council members, and occasionally esteemed generals.

I dreaded that my mate would use me as a pawn in settling scores with those who harbored grudges against my family, especially after the ordeal with Ava. Now, I realize that his personal animosity alone could be enough to end my life. I must recover swiftly and rid my system of silver. Every passing moment in this place feels like a countdown to my mate's arrival, and I am astonished that Alissa hasn't traced and attempted to rescue me. Could they have employed a spell to prevent it?

You're not dead yet," a voice resembling my mate's remarks, yanking me back to the present. I glimpse him near the door, clad entirely in black, mirroring the shade of his heart. His black dress

shirt contours his form, offering a tantalizing view of the muscles beneath. Even though this is the last thing I should be doing, I catch myself biting my lip, unintentionally gawking. Shit! I hate the mate bond.

His long legs, encased in black slacks, carry him forward as he pushes off the door, his expensive shoes emitting a rhythmic click against the floor. With purpose, he strides toward me by the bed. I stare starstruck, cursing the moon goddess for giving me such a sexy mate who will only bring me my death. His captivating scent, one that might elicit howls of pleasure from Marie if she were awake, engulfs my senses as he bends down to examine my face. In truth, even I would revel in delight with his scent enveloping me. This has to be the worst type of punishment ever.

"The damage could have been worse," he remarks, his gaze roaming over the bandages that cover my body. In this close proximity, I catch a glimpse of the chiseled chest beneath his partially unbuttoned shirt. He's undeniably well-built.

Nickolas performs an action that leaves my eyes wide and my heart racing. He seizes my forearm, drawing me closer until our faces are mere breaths apart. I notice his eyes have turned red, and the rhythmic pounding of my heart against my rib cage intensifies.

"You are not allowed to die. Do you hear me?" he declares, staring me directly in the eyes. I'm left utterly shocked. Does my mate genuinely care about me? His prior statements didn't suggest such concern, so where is this coming from? "Amelia," he pinches my arm, pulling me back to the present. I nod, understanding that he expects a response. "Good," Nickolas says, releasing my hand and moving away. As he reaches the door and turns the knob, he utters words that shatter any hope in my heart of us being together. "I can't have you dying before I have made use of you."

The door slams shut as he exits, making me jump in the bed. I release a relieved breath. For a second, I thought he was going to feed on me. Thank heavens!

I hear someone enter the room, prompting me to lift my head to see if Nickolas returned. Instead, it's a woman, likely a water witch. Her herbal scent matches the one who attended to my wounds earlier. She sports a secure bun with her brunette hair and appears to be in her early fifties. Flicking her hazel brown eyes in my direction, she walks toward one of the two doors in the room. One must be a bathroom and the other a walk-in closet.

She returns a few minutes later, making her way to me by the bed. Extending her hands toward my legs, I instinctively move away, avoiding her touch. "I want to help you to the bathroom," she offers, prompting my confusion.

"Why?" I question.

"Because His Majesty has requested it," she responds, seizing my legs and shifting them to the side of the bed.

“Why?" I ask again as she picks up my left hand and drapes it over her shoulders.

“On three princess,” she says, ignoring my question and lifting me off the bed. I look at her, wondering who the hell she is and what’s going on.

My legs wobble as they touch the ground. I wrap my hand around her waist for support. Ava really did a number on me. I would've fallen if she wasn't holding me.

She leads us to the door she recently exited, revealing an exquisite en suite bathroom. The space is a masterpiece, adorned with marble floors and walls, a claw-footed bathtub, and a separate glass-enclosed shower. The vanity showcases intricate carvings and details that speak of expert craftsmanship.

Seating me on the closed toilet seat, the woman moves toward the luxurious tub. With a graceful hand, she turns off the water and utters incantations, infusing the bath with herbs retrieved from her dress pockets. Despite her plain black dress, her movements carry an air of elegance. Returning to assist me, she aids in the removal of my clothes and bandages before guiding me into the herbal-infused bath. After ensuring my comfort, she exits the bathroom.

A sigh of relief escapes my lips as the warm water caresses my aching muscles. Closing my eyes, I rest my head, reflecting on the whirlwind of events that unfolded in the past hours. In the blink of an eye, my life took a drastic turn. The fate of my family hangs in the balance—if they're not already dead; my mate will stop at nothing to hunt them down and finish the job. I met a handsome stranger who helped my mate slaughter my people.

"My life is perfect," I mutter, sinking deeper into the soothing embrace of the tub.

Speaking of the incident, I wonder how the twins knew Eric. They mentioned his name, and thinking about it now, I realize their father must have betrayed us. He is in charge of patrol, and only with him failing at his job could we have been attacked. The

vampire king’s huge amount of entourage would have definitely raised a red flag to his underlings on duty. I can’t believe their father would betray his own kind. I have to wonder for what because every single dead werewolf’s blood is on his hands. I pray he never gets a good night’s sleep if Nickolas even lets him live after using him.

•••

Exiting the tub as the water turns cold, I'm relieved to find my legs stable beneath me. I step out of the bathroom after wrapping a towel around myself. I notice fresh clothes laid out on the bed—a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt that fit like they were made for me. If I didn’t know better, I would say they were bought with me in mind. After dressing, I wait for either Nickolas or the mysterious woman’s return, but minutes pass without any of them showing up.

Looking around the room, my eyes light up as I notice a ray of sunlight streaming through the windows. I rush over and pull the curtains wide open, letting the sunlight flood the room. Daybreak! A small smile tugs at my lips—I've never been happier to see the sun in my life. Attempting to open the windows, I find them unyielding, but that's hardly surprising. Moving away from it, I search the room for anything that might aid in breaking it. The scent of vampires lingers outside, likely guards at the door, and they are just what I need to escape.

Grabbing the table lamp from the nightstand, I hurl it against the window. The glass shatters with a crash, and I swiftly take cover under the bed. The guards, drawn by the noise, rush into the room, only to regret it instantly as the sunlight burns their skin. The air is filled with the acrid scent of burning flesh, making me gag and hastily cover my nose. Screams of agony accompany their rapid retreat from the room.

"She's escaped!" one of them shouts, and I hear their hurried footsteps retreating.

"Quickly inform His Majesty," the other one commands, his voice fading into the distance. I wait for a few minutes before cautiously emerging from under the bed.

Approaching the windows, I confirm that they fell for my trap. My mate and Eric are running in the direction I would have taken if I had exited through the window. They're accompanied by high-ranking vampire soldiers. Perfect! Just want I wanted.

I swiftly move to the door, scanning the surroundings for any signs of vampires. Finding none, I dash down the grand staircase, through the foyer, and out the wide-open door they left behind. I sprint in the opposite direction they took. Tall trees line the path, providing cover. I run, ignoring the pain from tree branches, pricking my skin from the thorns on them. My bare feet get stabbed with little stones on the ground, but I don’t stop and continue running.

I didn’t shift because it would be easier for them to sniff me out in the air and find me. I have no plan if I manage to escape successfully, but I will figure out something once I manage to. I wonder if I would be able to find Alissa and my family. Alissa must have hidden them somewhere no one would find them. In a way, I'm happy she did, but I'm also worried it means I might never find them. Hopefully, I will.

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CHAPTER SIX

NICKOLAS

I stride out of the room where Amelia is, making my way to my office within the castle. As I approach the door, my legal advisor and best friend, Eric, intercepts me.

"What is it, Eric?" I inquire, entering my office with him following closely behind.

"Your mat—" Eric starts, but I cut him off abruptly, my jaw clenching as I ball my fists.

"Don’t ever fucking call her that," I retort through gritted teeth, my tone lethal.

"Got it," he responds, lifting his hand in surrender.

"She is nothing but a fucking prisoner to me; always remember that," I add, walking toward the chair behind my desk.

"Got it again."

"What about her do you want to discuss?" I ask, taking my seat and retrieving my glasses from the desk drawer. Putting them on, I start sorting through the documents on my desk, searching for the most important ones. Being king has its perks, but working through documents isn't one of them.

"What are your plans for her?" Eric inquires, settling into a chair across from mine. I pause in the midst of sorting documents, lifting a dark brow at my best friend, wondering why he asked such a seemingly obvious question.

"I know you wish to use her to find her family, but because of what Ava has done, her mind can’t be forcefully penetrated for now," Eric explains.

"I fucking know that," I snap at Eric, not directed anger toward him but rather at the mess Ava created. She ruined my plans, and I can't fucking do anything than express my disagreement with it. She's my freaking aunt, and the whole situation is completely

fucked up.

"Hence my question because we also know torture isn't going to do the trick. Ava wasn't supposed to harm her physically, but she did. She asked Amelia during the torture, and despite being so close to death, Amelia didn't give up a single piece of information."

"I also fucking know that, Eric," I snap at him, irritation seeping into my tone. He keeps pointing out the obvious as if I'm oblivious to the fucked-up situation.

"Sorry if my questions are fucking pissing you off, but that's not my intention," he replies.

"Then what is it because if you don't have an idea of how I am going to make use of her, then I advise you to shut your fucking mouth."

"Got it, but before I shut my fucking mouth. How is she doing? Did the bath with Beatrice help?" he asks, prompting me to pause and study my best friend, curious about his unusual concern for Amelia.

"Do you fucking like her?" The question slips out before I can filter it. Eric raises a brow, staring at me as if I've lost my mind. I reciprocate with a raised brow, folding my arms and awaiting an explanation for his unexpected care for Amelia.

He looks away, his eyes shifting to the ground. "She reminds me of Veronica," he admits.

"Oh," I respond, my shoulders dropping as understanding dawns on me. That explains why he's treating Amelia with such kindness, even though she's the enemy.

"They would have been the same age," he adds, his gaze distant as he delves into his thoughts.

"Yeah," I say, my thoughts drifting to a time I wish never to remember at the mention of Veronica. Neither of us says a word after that for a good minute. Eric's mind was probably filled with thoughts of the past. I struggle to bury those thoughts as they crawl from the deepest hole in my mind, pushing to be revisited.

"I should be on my way. Those fucking bastards can't get anything done without me," Eric says, breaking the stifling silence in the room. A subtle sniffle escapes him as he puts on a brave smile before rising to his feet.

"Make sure they find the witch." The bastards he refers to are the vampires and witches reporting to him about the search for Amelia's family.

“I will, Your Majesty.” He bows, before turning around and exiting my office.

I close my eyes, leaning back in my chair. Memories buried deep within my mind persistently claw at the barriers I've erected to contain them. I push back against the haunting images and emotions, determined to maintain control. These memories are locked away for a reason, and I won't revisit them. Yet, after the conversation with Eric, the mental walls seem to falter. My mind, rebellious and indifferent to my commands, carries me unwittingly to the room where my nightmares were conceived.

Centuries ago

A sweet lullaby plays in my ears as a gentle hand pats my hair. Slowly, I open my eyes, stretching my little muscles as I sit up from the cold, unforgiving concrete floor.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” Mummy says, her smile radiating warmth as she pecks my forehead.

“Morning, Mummy.” I wrap my tiny hands around her neck, embracing her with all the might my little frame can muster. The chill in my bones disappears, replaced by the comforting warmth that only hugging Mummy can provide.

“How was your sleep, baby?” she inquires, pulling away but keeping me at arm’s length.

“It was good, Mummy. How about you?” My innocent gaze scans her body, and a frown forms on my small face.

“I am..." Before she can finish, my tiny finger lands on her bruised lips.

“They hurt you again, Mummy.” Tears well up in my eyes, witnessing new bruises on her face. Stepping out of her arms, I take a step back to fully look at her, discovering more injuries scattered across her body, with dried blood between her legs. Tears spill down my cheeks.

“I'm okay, baby. Please don’t cry.” Mummy reaches for my arms, pulling me close as she wipes my tears away with her dirty palms, marked by cuts.

“Why do they hurt you, Mummy? You are a good person. You told me good things happen to good people.”

“I know I did, baby, but sometimes horrible things happen to good people.”

“Why?” I sniffle, holding back more tears, not wanting to make Mummy feel bad.

“Because they are evil, baby, and evil people will always want to hurt good people.”

“That’s not fair, Mummy.”

“That’s life for you, baby.” She pulls me onto her lap, planting a gentle kiss on my head. “It’s never fair to us, the good ones.” She wraps her arms around me, holding me close against her chest.

“I don’t recall life ever mistreating you, Caroline,” a voice says from outside the cell where Mummy and I are being held. Her grip around me tightens as the woman pulls the cell door open and steps in.

“Your Majesty.” Mummy bows her head at the blonde woman. I glare at her blue eyes, fury burning through my green ones. I hate her. Every time she’s here, Mummy always ends up badly hurt.

"Aren’t you the cutest?" She coos, a sinister smile playing on her lips, attempting to touch my face, but I slap her hand away.

"Stay away from my Mummy," I scream at her, spreading my arms wide in a protective stance, shielding Mummy from the blonde woman. Mummy's eyes widen in terror, and she instantly releases me, dropping her head to the ground.

"Please forgive him, your Majesty. He is still a child. He doesn’t know better," Mummy pleads, her voice trembling with fear. My small bones ignite with fury, witnessing Mummy stooping to beg this heartless woman. I try to lift Mummy’s shoulders to raise her head, but she resists. Instead, she forces me down, but I don’t budge. I glare at the evil woman.

“I can see he has the king’s temper,” the blonde woman remarks, staring back at me with malice evident in her cold, blue eyes.

"Please forgive him. Please," Mummy implores.

“You don’t have to worry about me forgiving him, Caroline. He is the king’s son. I would never do anything to harm him." She smiles, her eyes void of any emotion as she utters those chilling words.

“Thank you, thank you.” Mummy lifts her head, smiling, stretching her hand to pull me close to her but is stopped by the evil woman. She grabs Mummy by the neck, slamming her against the wall with a speed I have never seen before.

“Mummy,” I scream, horrified as the impact of her head hitting the wall echoes across the room. Mummy’s face reddens, with veins appearing on her face as the evil woman's nails cruelly puncture her neck, causing blood to cascade down Mummy’s chest.

“But you, on the other hand. I can’t say what will happen to you,” the evil woman snarls, punching Mummy in the belly. Mummy screams

in pain, her stomach caving in. I wince, closing my eyes. They shot open, hearing Mummy scream again. I rush over to them and hit the evil woman with my little hands, screaming at her to let my mummy go, but my punches have no effect on her. She hits Mummy multiple times till her eyes give out.

My body jolts in the chair as the door to my office is forcibly thrust open, bringing me back to the present.

"What's wrong?" I inquire, noting the sheer terror etched across Eric's face.

"She's gone," he declares, his words sending a shock through me.

"How long?" I question, swiftly rising from my seat and striding toward the door.

"A few minutes, tops."

"Great, then we can still find her. Let's go." I step out of my office, making my way outside the castle toward the direction the soldiers believe she took.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

AMELIA

As I sprint through the forest, my ears pick up on the rhythmic sound of footsteps following closely behind me. Panic sets in. Shit, they must have seen through my ruse. My pace quickens, though I'm certain I'm already pushing myself to the limits of my speed. The sounds of pursuit draw nearer, accompanied by an unsettling scent permeating the air—the unmistakable aroma of vampires. No, they can't catch me.

I decide to take a risk, recognizing it as my only hope at this moment. I come to a quick stop, reaching for my shirt to take it off. Shifting requires undressing first; I don't have spare clothes to change into once I shift back, and I'd ruin this one if I shift without removing them first. The footsteps grow louder, and the urgency intensifies. The forest around me seems to hold its breath. Just at that moment, a thud echoes behind me, signaling someone's abrupt landing. The rich scent of rainforest envelops me, and my eyes widen in fear. He found me.

He seizes me by the neck, wrenching me around before I can draw my next breath. My mate stands before me, fury blazing in his eyes, his nose flaring as he pants heavily. A surge of trepidation courses through me, uncertain of what punishment awaits me for attempting to escape. I brace myself for an impending storm of retribution.

With measured steps, I begin to back away, but my foot collides with an unseen obstacle, sending me sprawling into a mud-covered heap. My clothes and body bear the stains, yet my sole focus remains on putting distance between myself and his murderous gaze. My fingernails grip dirt as I claw my way backward, desperation fueling my escape.

I observe my mate reaching for me on the ground, terror

coursing through me. In a frantic attempt to evade his grasp, I twist around, only to feel him seize me by the hair, lifting me from the ground. He presses me against his chest. Tremors of fear course through my body as his warm chest meets my back, and his fangs brush against the rapidly pulsating vein on my neck. My breath catches. He's going to kill me.

I shut my eyes, silently praying to the heavens that the pain won't be as excruciating as the tales I've heard. I don't deserve a painful death.

"I should fucking kill you!" he snarls, his hot breath brushing against my neck, sending a shiver down my spine. The baby hairs on my neck stand at attention, a silent testament to the fear coursing through me.

Plea-s-se don't," I stutter, my heart pounding so loudly it's almost comical how he doesn't seem to mind.

I scream as his fangs puncture my skin, thrashing against him in a futile attempt to free myself. He holds me firmly, nails digging into my waist to secure his grip. Desperation fuels me as I repeatedly hit my elbow against his stomach, but it proves futile. Blood trickles down my neck, staining my shirt and marking the grim reality of my dire situation.

My eyes grow heavy, struggling to stay open as I feel my strength wane with each passing second. Tears stream down my cheeks, a silent testimony to the ache in my heart. It's unfathomable that my mate, the one meant to be my protector, is now the one draining the life out of me. Never in a million years did I envision this dreadful fate.

The ache in my heart intensifies as my body weakens to the point where standing becomes an impossible feat, and I surrender, melting against him. My eyes close involuntarily, and I brace myself for the inevitable. I patiently wait for the final embrace of death, a cruel destiny I never anticipated from the one I thought would be my eternal partner.

A sudden shift occurs; his fangs retreat from my neck. The warmth against my back slowly dissipates, and the absence of his hard chest against mine is palpable. Struggling to keep my eyes fully open, I manage to open them, but the world remains a hazy blur. My vision is clouded, and I can't discern the events unfolding around me, but I sense a presence in front of me.

The weight of my legs gives way, but instead of plummeting to

the ground, I find myself being lifted into someone's arms, cradled in a bridal style. Through the foggy haze, I notice features that bear a resemblance to my mate's, yet uncertainty lingers. It's unclear whether it's him or someone else who has come to my aid in this critical moment.

I fix my gaze on the person through my half-opened eyes, and a surge of tears wells up as I observe their lips stained with blood. It's Nickolas. The painful realization that he fed on me and nearly ended my life hits me like a tidal wave. My body quivers against his, and tears cascade down my face unabated. The sight of him, his face void of emotion, only intensifies the ache in my heart. There's no remorse in his eyes, no regret for the harm he inflicted.

My heart clenches tighter in my chest as I grapple with the bitter truth—he doesn't even regret what he did. Anger courses through me, fueled by the frustration of being hurt by someone who seems unaffected by their own actions. Asshole! I hate that I'm hurt by what he did, and he isn't. I wish I hated him as much as he hates me. Maybe then, I wouldn't care about anything he does to me. Pushing back tears, I realize he's not even worth them, and I'm certain they only fuel his stupid ego.

Nickolas walks us back to the palace and into a room, gently laying me on the bed. I turn away from him, not wanting to see his face right now. But his presence looms over me, feeling the heat of his body as he stands beside the bed. His gaze bores holes into the back of my head. Thoughts swirl in my mind, questioning his lingering presence. Is he contemplating whether to complete what he started?

Turning back around, I open my mouth to confront him, but an unexpected guest rudely enters the room before I can utter a word. A woman bursts in, her five-inch red-bottomed Louis Vuitton heels clicking against the marble floor. She strides over to Nickolas and forcefully presses her lips against his.

Frozen in disbelief, I watch as Nickolas tense, gripping her arms with nails digging into her skin. He forcefully throws her off, glaring at her in silence. Unfazed, she smiles and uses her finger to clean some of the blood from the side of his lips.

"Hmm, amazing," she moans, licking my blood off her finger. "I can't believe you drank without me, baby," she adds, seemingly unperturbed.

"What are you doing here, Ember?" Nickolas questions, releasing

her arm.

"Who is this, baby?" she asks, ignoring his question and approaching me by the bed. Her scent invades my nose, prompting me to scrunch it in disgust. I'm not particularly fond of her scent.

"My mate," Nickolas grumbles, his jaw tight, as if saying those words was hard. I gaze at him, tears welling up, but I sniffle and push them back. He isn't worth my tears.

"So, she's the werewolf princess," Ember remarks, excitement evident in her tone. It strikes me as odd. "She does look like Queen Jane, as everyone says, but she is the uglier version of her." She stares at me, a sinful smile playing on her lips and a hint of jealousy flickering in her eyes. It's almost imperceptible, but I catch it—she harbors resentment toward me. My mate remains silent but seizes her arm.

"Let's go," he says, pulling her away.

Ember, however, doesn't move immediately, locking her gaze with mine. "I'll be back for you, princess," She winks at me before linking her hand with Nickolas and walking out with him.

An eerie feeling settles within me at her words, prompting me to say a prayer to the heavens, desperately wishing never to meet her again.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

I turn away from the door, curling up and drawing my knees close to my chest. With my eyes shut tight, I seek solace in the darkness—not for sleep, as rest is hard to come by in the enemy's den. I must bide my time, allowing my wounds to mend and gathering my strength before devising my next move. My hand instinctively drifts toward the tender bite on my neck, a silent reminder of the recent encounter. As my fingertips graze the mark, a shiver courses down my spine, and I gasp at the sensation. I'm all too aware that this occurred because of him—no one else's bite would have elicited such a reaction. Swallowing hard, I shift uneasily in the bed, attempting to dispel the unsettling feeling creeping over me.

My brief moment of peace shatters as someone seizes my arm with force, wrenching me from the bed and sending me crashing to the ground. Ember's eyes blaze with unmistakable hatred as she looms over me, her grip unyielding as she drags me across the floor. A sharp pain shoots through my side as it scrapes against the unforgiving surface, eliciting a wince from me.

Gritting my teeth, I lift my head defiantly, meeting Ember's gaze with a steely glare of my own. She knows full well that Nickolas has just fed from me, leaving me in no condition to withstand such rough treatment. As for how I didn't hear her approach, the result from Nickolas's feeding has dulled my senses, making me unaware of her presence until it was too late.

As I tear my gaze away from Ember, I assess the damage to my side, noting the bruises marring my porcelain skin. Before I can fully process the extent of my injuries, Ember grabs me by my shirt collar, yanking me upright with a snarl. I struggle to maintain my balance, my legs trembling beneath me as she releases her grip, causing me to collapse to the ground once more. The impact is

harsher this time, sending a jolt of pain through my bruised knees.

"Hey!" I retort, allowing my anger to override my better judgment, momentarily forgetting the precariousness of my situation.

"Did you just shout at me?" Ember's voice booms, her words laced with fury as her hand connects with a sharp slap across my cheek. The sting radiates through my skin, igniting a fiery rage within me as I instinctively bring my hand to cradle the tender flesh. The urge to strike back simmers beneath the surface, but I restrain myself, knowing the futility of retaliating against her.

Glaring daggers at Ember, I meet her gaze with an intensity that could pierce steel. In that moment, a painful realization washes over me, threatening to engulf me in a tide of despair.

I'm nothing but a pawn, at the mercy of my mate's mistress, to be treated and tortured as she pleases. The words reverberate in my mind—"my mate's mistress"—a phrase I never imagined uttering. Yet, it's unmistakably clear, without anyone needing to tell me. It was written all over her when she walked in earlier.

Tears well up in my eyes as I grapple with the weight of my reality, the realization sinking in like an anchor dragging me down into the depths of despair. The gravity of my situation crushes down on me.

"Apologize," Ember grits out, her fingers wrapping around my chin with a force that threatens to crush bone. The pressure intensifies, sending waves of pain radiating through my jaw. Despite the agony, I refuse to yield to her demand, my defiance burning bright within me like a flickering flame in the darkness.

Blinking back tears, I steel myself against the pain, refusing to allow her the satisfaction of seeing me break. I may be their prisoner, but I am still a princess—a fact I cling to as a source of inner strength. Though I cannot escape the physical torment she may inflict upon me, I am resolved to maintain control over how it affects me. And in this moment, I refuse to offer her the apology she demands.

"Did you fucking hear me? I said apologize for raising your voice against me!" Ember's voice booms, her nails digging into my chin with a relentless force that breaks the skin, drawing blood that stains my shirt once again. I grimace, the pain searing through me as her grip tightens, refusing to release its hold.

"You're hurting me," I manage to grit out, attempting to pry her

nails away from my chin, but she only digs them deeper, inflicting more pain with each passing second.

"That's the point, bitch," she snarls, her words dripping with venom as she delivers another brutal slap across my face. The impact sends my head snapping to the side, my lips splitting open as a sharp pain shoots through me. Rage surges within me, threatening to consume me whole as I struggle to keep control of my emotions.

Closing my eyes, I utter a silent vow to myself, a promise that my time for retribution will come, but now is not the moment. I know Ember is taking advantage of my weakened state, knowing full well that I'm unable to fight back if I dared.

"Now fucking get up," she commands, her nails digging into my shoulder as she forcefully lifts me off the ground. Bracing myself for the inevitable fall, I'm caught off guard as someone intervenes, their arms wrapping around me before I can hit the ground once more.

"Eric," I breathe, relief flooding through me as I recognize his familiar scent and feel the reassuring strength of his embrace. When did he get here? The question lingers in my mind, but for now, I'm grateful for his unexpected presence.

"Hello, princess," Eric greets me with a warm smile, his pearl-white teeth flashing in the dim light. Despite his handsomeness, I can't help but compare him to my mate, Nickolas. It's a futile comparison, but one that crosses my mind, nonetheless.

"What are you doing here?" Ember's voice interrupts our brief moment of interaction, her annoyance palpable.

"Hello, Ember, it's nice to see you too," Eric responds with a smile, though it's met with an eye roll from Ember.

"I asked you a damn question," Ember barks, her impatience evident.

"His Majesty is looking for you in his office," Eric replies, and I watch as Ember's demeanor shifts instantly. Her eyes light up at the mention of Nickolas, a bright smile gracing her features.

She regards Eric with newfound interest, her tone softening as she inquires, "Did he say why?"

"No, but he asked you to hurry as he will leave soon to visit his uncle," Eric informs her.

"Okay," Ember responds eagerly, already making her way out the door, completely forgetting about me in her haste.

Eric meets my gaze with a small, reassuring smile before shifting

his hands under my feet and lifting me into his arms bridal style. With a gentle touch, he settles me onto the bed, tucking the covers over my legs with care.

"Thank you," I murmur softly, shifting to find a more comfortable position against the pillows.

"You're welcome," Eric replies warmly, stepping away momentarily before returning with a tray in hand. As he sets the tray on my lap, the sweet aroma of food fills the room, and my stomach responds with an audible growl. "Here you go, princess. You must be famished. Three days is a lot of time without food," Eric remarks, lifting the lid off the plate to reveal a tempting spread. Despite the lingering doubt about the safety of the food, hunger overrides any caution, and I eagerly dig in, savoring each mouthful.

"Thank you," I mumble through a mouthful of food, the flavors exploding on my tongue as I indulge in the long-awaited meal. Surprisingly, I hadn't felt hungry during my captivity, likely a result of being unconscious for part of the time and preoccupied with other concerns during the waking hours.

"You're welcome again, princess," Eric replies with a warm smile.

As I finish the last morsel on the plate, Eric hands me a glass of water, and I gratefully accept it, allowing the cool liquid to quench my thirst. With the immediate need for nourishment satisfied, a lingering question tugs at my thoughts, prompting me to voice it.

"How did you know them?" I inquire, curiosity piqued by Eric's unexpected intervention and familiarity with Jake and Blake.

"Who?" Eric questions, crossing the room to the couch positioned in front of the crackling fireplace. With practiced ease, he pours himself a glass of bourbon from the nearby bar tray table, the amber liquid glinting in the firelight.

"The twins," I clarify, my curiosity burning as I seek confirmation for my suspicions.

"I think you know the answer to that, Amelia," Eric responds cryptically, a knowing glint in his eyes as he takes a sip of his drink.

My suspicions are confirmed; the father of the twins betrayed our kind. Eric and the twins likely crossed paths during the clandestine meetings held to plan the massacre of my kind. "Are they dead?" I ask, a shiver of unease running down my spine as I contemplate the grim possibilities. The twins were collaborators, complicit in the betrayal of my kind. Yet, a part of me wonders if Nickolas spared

them, only to change his mind later.

"Yes," Eric confirms with a solemn nod.

"Good," I respond, a mixture of emotions swirling within me. While I'm not entirely surprised by Eric's actions, there's a sense of vindication that washes over me. The twins deserved their fate for their betrayal, and a part of me is relieved that justice has been served. "I wish others could see the consequences of betraying one's kind, too," I add, my voice tinged with a hint of bitterness. It's a harsh reality, but sometimes, the most severe consequences are necessary to deter future betrayals and uphold the integrity of our kind.

"We were never going to let them live, and they dared to pour wine on the king's mate. How insolent of them," Eric remarks, his tone tinged with a hint of amusement as he winks at me. His words catch me off guard.

"But you didn't know I was Nickolas's mate when we met," I interject.

"Yes, but I remembered as I killed them," Eric replies, his gaze piercing as he holds my stare, a chill creeping down my spine. I'm at a loss for words, unsure of how to process Eric's revelation. I decide to set that aside for now and inquire about their father. "He should be dead if Nickolas has finished getting everything he needs from him."

"The same way I would be once he is done with me," I utter, the weight of my words hanging heavy in the air. Eric's reaction is palpable; he stiffens, his gaze locking with mine, a silent acknowledgment passing between us.

Without a word, Eric swallows hard, his eyes betraying a tumult of emotions he struggles to contain. He down his drink in one swift motion, a silent gesture that speaks volumes.

There's no need for further explanation; we both understand the unspoken truth. Nickolas hasn't killed me because he hasn't finished with me yet.

Neither of us speaks after that, the weight of our unspoken truths hanging heavily in the air. We lapse into a tranquil silence, each lost in our own thoughts as we grapple with the uncertainty of our futures.

As exhaustion washes over me, I succumb to the embrace of sleep, my mind swirling with a million thoughts.

NICKOLAS

I stand by the bed, glaring at my mate as she sleeps, a scowl etched onto my features. The sheets are stained with her blood, mud, and her fucking intoxicating scent—a scent that both infuriates and entices me. A low growl rumbles in my chest, remembering how amazing she scents. I clench my fists tightly, my jaw grinding as I curse the heavens for making her my mate. It could have been anyone but her, yet fate had other plans. Now, I find myself getting hard at the memory of her scent and the sweet taste of her blood.

I remember vividly the way she smelled, the way her blood tasted—like sweet nectar, tantalizing and addictive. My tongue instinctively runs across my lips, craving any lingering trace of her essence. I know her blood would be addictive due to her gifts, but there's something more to it, something inexplicable that draws me to her on a primal level.

The legends don't lie—they say your mate is the ultimate pleasure, and they couldn't be more fucking right. I could feed off her all day and still crave more. The mere thought of fucking her hard while feeding off her or how fucking sweet she would also taste between her legs sends a surge of desire coursing through me, my arousal evident in the pulsing of my dick. Fuck! I force myself to regain composure, running a hand across my face in frustration. I needed to fuck, but I couldn't. The only woman I wanted to be buried deep within was also the last person I desired. I throw my head back, sighing deeply, caught in a whirlwind of conflicting desires.

I stride out of the room and ascend the stairs to my quarters. Once inside, I make a beeline for the bathroom, shedding my clothes along the way. Under the hot spray of water, I can't help but give in to the forbidden fantasy, my hand moving of its own volition as I pleasure myself to thoughts of her. The intensity of my climax leaves me breathless, the mere idea of being inside her enough to elicit such an explosive release. Shaking off the lingering sensations, I force myself to focus, stepping out of the shower and toweling off. I select a pair of black jeans and a crisp white T-shirt from my closet before exiting the room, determined to push aside the tempting thoughts consuming my mind.

Descending the grand staircase, I step out of the castle and into

my awaiting black Mercedes parked at the entrance. I instruct the driver to head to my uncle's residence. Despite his royal status, Uncle Leo prefers the seclusion of his own estate, away from the prying eyes of palace life.

A few minutes later, the car comes to a smooth halt in front of a stately two-story mansion nestled amidst lush greenery. I exit the vehicle and stride purposefully to the front door, where I'm greeted by Claire, the maid. Offering her a brief nod, I pass through the threshold and make my way to the dining room, where Uncle Leo and Ava await.

"Hello, Uncle, Ava," I greet as I enter the room.

"Junior," Ava responds, rising to peck me on the cheek.

"I'm still pissed off with you," I remark, taking a seat beside Uncle Leo on his left, while Ava settles on his right.

“Why? It’s not like you care about her,” Ava retorts, casually sipping her wine.

"I don’t, but I need the damn girl alive to get my revenge," I argue, my frustration evident.

“I know, and don’t worry, next time I see her, I promise not to touch a single hair on her head,” Ava assures me with a fake smile.

"Thank you," I huff, hoping she'll keep her word.

“What brings you over, son?” Uncle Leo finally chimes in.

“I wanted to speak to Ava about Amelia.”

“What about her?” Ava inquires, her curiosity piqued.

“I drank her blood today.” The room falls silent as their eyes widen in shock.

“Say something,” I urge, trying to break the tense atmosphere. Uncle Leo clears his throat, shifting in his seat.

“I don’t need to tell you what this could cause,” he says, his tone grave. I swallow hard, nodding in acknowledgment.

“I know.”

The extra time I spent in the bathroom is enough to tell me I fucked up big time. Feeding off your mate is a part of the mating process. Doing it without fucking her would only make me want to fuck her more. I only did it because it was the only way I could teach her a lesson. As much as I hate her, I can’t fucking touch a hair on her head, so what better way to punish her than to make her think I would suck her dry.

“You want me to cast the chaste spell?”

“No! I just want something less strong.” I don’t want to cut off

my libido completely, but I want to go to sleep tonight and not wonder how many rounds it would take to make her unable to walk for days.

"No problem, I can handle it before you leave," Ava reassures me.

"Thank you. I also came for another reason," I say, my voice tinged with urgency.

"What?" Ava's curiosity is piqued, her brow furrowing slightly.

"Is there a way we can cast a spell to prevent others from using her gifts?" I ask.

"Hmm..." Ava rests her chin on her knuckles, deep in thought. "I don't know, but I could research and see what I can come up with."

"Thank you," I reply.

"You don't have to thank me, Junior. The last thing we want is someone finding out she has her mother's gift," Ava reminds me.

"That's good to hear," I say, sinking back into the chair. I pray to the heavens that no one discovers Amelia's gifts. Rumors have been swirling about her resemblance to Jane, and the thought of someone connecting the dots and seeking to exploit her abilities sends a chill down my spine. I can't afford the chaos that would ensue. I cling to the hope that Ava will find a solution fast.

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CHAPTER NINE

AMELIA

The stinging of my cheeks jolts me awake, sending a surge of fear and confusion coursing through my veins. As I glance around the room, disoriented by the abrupt awakening, I see Ember standing by the edge of the bed, her gaze ablaze with intensity. There's no need for words; I understand immediately that she just used a slap to rouse me from my sleep.

Gingerly, I raise my hand to my swollen cheek, the ache throbbing beneath my fingertips. I meet Ember's glare with a mixture of shock and apprehension, the weight of her hatred hanging heavy in the air between us.

"Get your fucking ass up," she barks, her words a harsh echo in the room. With a forceful tug, she yanks me out of bed once again, but this time, I manage to maintain my balance. I regained some of my strength as I healed during my sleep.

"Follow me," Ember commands, her voice laced with authority as she strides toward the door. I hesitate for a moment, uncertainty gnawing at the edges of my resolve. But ultimately, I know defiance will only invite more trouble. With a resigned sigh, I scan the floor for footwear, my eyes landing on a pair of worn slippers. Slipping them on, I trail after Ember, my steps quickening to keep pace with her brisk stride, determined not to give her any reason to unleash her wrath upon me once more.

We ascend the stairs to the second floor, stopping at the third door on the right. As Ember swings it open, an assault of her pungent scent overwhelms my senses, confirming that we're entering her room. But amidst the familiar odor, another scent lingers, causing my heart to clench in anguish. It's the faint trace of Nickolas, a painful reminder that he hasn't reserved himself solely for me. Though I knew this truth, it doesn't lessen the sting of being

led into the room where he committed his indiscretions.

With a heavy heart, I step further into the room, my eyes drawn to the shirt I recognize all too well, discarded carelessly on the floor. Its presence serves as a haunting symbol of the betrayal that still lingers in the air, casting a shadow over the room and deepening the ache within me.

Ember's voice drifts toward me, but it's muffled by the cacophony of thoughts swirling in my mind. Was this why he called her yesterday? Did he seek her to fuck her? The vivid imagery of Nickolas and Ember having sex on the disheveled bed or atop the cluttered vanity table, with the broken mirror bearing witness to their intimacy, floods my consciousness, igniting a firestorm of anguish within me.

I struggle to push back the tears that threaten to spill, willing myself to block out the intrusive images, but they persist, relentless in their assault on my senses. Blinking furiously, I attempt to regain my composure, but the sight of a discarded condom on the floor shatters whatever fragile facade I've managed to construct. Fresh tears well in my eyes, betraying the anguish that grips my soul as I confront the harsh reality of Nickolas's betrayal.

"Why the fuck are you crying?" Ember's harsh voice cuts through the haze of my thoughts, pulling me back to the present moment. I turn to face her, and if it's possible, my heart shatters even more at the sight before me. How could I have been so blind? Hickeys mar her neck, evidence of recent intimacy slowly fading as if she's deliberately prolonging their presence. It's painfully clear they just had sex just before she sought me out.

Tears blur my vision as I turn away, unable to bear the agony of standing in a room saturated with the scent of sex, a cruel reminder of my mate's betrayal.

"I don't fucking care why you're crying, but clean the place before I'm back," Ember commands, her words slicing through the heavy silence like a knife. I whirl around, meeting her gaze with bloodshot eyes, incredulous at her audacity.

Clean this place? Hasn't she inflicted enough pain simply by bringing me here?

"Don't fucking look at me like that," she snaps, her hand connecting with my cheek in a sharp slap. I barely flinch, the ache in my heart eclipsing any physical pain.

"I can't clean this place," I murmur, the thought of doing so

unbearable.

"What did you just fucking say?" Ember's tone is incredulous, her brow furrowing in disbelief.

"I said I can't clean this place," I repeat, my voice trembling with defiance.

Ember bursts into laughter, devoid of any genuine amusement, before abruptly stopping. "Repeat what you said," she commands, her arms crossed tightly over her chest, her eyes void of emotion.

"I can't clean this place," I say, holding her gaze with unwavering resolve.

"You can't," Ember acknowledges, moving closer to me, her demeanor shifting subtly. I nod, silently reaffirming my stance. "You can't," she repeats, her words laced with venom, before delivering another stinging slap to my face. I grit my teeth, fighting to contain the pain that radiates through me, my fists clenching tightly at my sides in an effort to maintain composure. "You fucking can't!" she screams, her hand poised to strike me once more, but this time, I refuse to be a passive victim. With a surge of determination, I seize her wrist, halting her in her tracks. Enough is enough. There's a limit to how much one can endure. "You dare to stop me?" She laughs bitterly, yanking her hand away and taking a step back. "It seems you've forgotten who you are." I remain silent. "I think I need to remind you," Ember declares, her voice dripping with menace. Without warning, shards of glass rain down on my body, followed by a sharp impact on my head.

I gasp in pain, my eyes darting to the floor to see a broken lamp lying at my feet. Blood streams from the wound on my forehead, and a throbbing ache settles in. Lifting my head up, my eyes meet the ceiling as I am suddenly tackled to the ground.

I grimace as the force of the impact reverberates through my skull upon hitting the hard marble floor. Black spots dance before my eyes, and I struggle to maintain my composure. But Ember wastes no time seizing the opportunity. She straddles me, raining down a flurry of vicious slaps across my face, each blow stinging with a searing pain.

"Stop!" I yell, my hands flailing in the air in a futile attempt to ward her off, but I can't seem to make contact with her blurred forms as my vision swims. Ember's nails rake across my skin, drawing blood, and I wince in pain, summoning all my strength to push her away. She staggers back, panting, her hands stained with

my blood.

Struggling to clear the haze in my eyes, I attempt to rise to my feet, but before I can, Ember is upon me again, straddling me with a vengeful fury.

"Next time when I say do something, you fucking do it, bitch!" she screams into my face, her hand poised to deliver a punishing blow. But before she can follow through, I sink my teeth into her hand, eliciting a sharp cry of pain.

Ember recoils in shock, getting off me, and I scramble to my feet, feeling unsteady as I stand. I shake my head to clear my vision, determination surging through me. I may not be able to match Ava's magical prowess, but I'll be damned if I let this bitch overpower me. "You fucking bit me!" Ember exclaims, inspecting her injured hand, but I remain silent, glaring at her defiantly. Her pain is a small recompense compared to the agony she inflicted upon me moments ago. I survey the room for anything that might aid me in this impromptu battle when Ember suddenly screams something that freezes me in place. "Guards! She's trying to kill me!" Ember's shrill cry echoes through the room, and two men burst in, their eyes scanning the area for danger. I stare at her in disbelief. How could she twist the truth like that? I'm the one on the verge of death here. "Seize her before she kills me!" Ember points at me, her voice dripping with false panic as she holds up her bloody hand, the evidence of my bite clear for all to see. The guards rush toward me, their hands closing around my arms with a vice-like grip.

Ember feigns exhaustion, and I continue to stare at her in shock. This bitch!

"Quickly, take her to the dungeon while I inform the king of what she's done," Ember orders, her tone laced with malicious satisfaction.

My mouth hangs open as they drag me out of the room, my mind reeling with disbelief. I can barely keep my eyes open, and yet she's accusing me of trying to kill her. Wow! I'm speechless at this moment.

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My eyes shoot open, jolting awake as I feel liquid being poured over me. I gasp, struggling to breathe as water cascades over my face, soaking me to the bone. I had passed out the moment I was

brought to the dungeon. "Stop! I'm awake," I manage to muffle out amidst the onslaught of water, my voice barely audible over the sound of pouring liquid. The sensation is disorienting, and I can feel the weight of my drenched clothes clinging uncomfortably to my skin.

"It was about time," Ember's voice cuts through the darkness, accompanied by the sound of the water finally ceasing. I blink rapidly, trying to clear the water from my eyes, my nose burning from the onslaught. As I regain my senses, I realize my wounds are healing rapidly, leaving no scars since silver wasn't used to assault me. I must have been out for quite some time. The room around me is dimly lit. "Drag her out," Ember commands, her voice reverberating off the cold stone walls. A guard, barely visible in the dim light, stands obediently beside her. I pant, attempting to catch my breath as the guard moves forward, his grip firm as he prepares to haul me away.

"Let me go! What do you wish to do to me?" I struggle against the guard's hold, my body still weak from Ember's assault earlier, but determination fuels my defiance.

"Lay her down on the table," Ember commands the guard, and they swiftly comply, strapping me down with coarse ropes that dig into my skin. The atmosphere in the dungeon is suffocating, thick with the scent of blood and death.

As they secure me, I hear the sound of fabric tearing, and dread fills me as I realize they've ripped open the back of my shirt. Ember extends her hand, and a whip is placed in it. My heart clenches in fear. She's about to whip me for biting her hand. But what truly shatters me is the realization that she reported it to Nickolas, and he allowed her to punish me. The betrayal cuts deep, a stark reminder of the fucked up dynamic of our relationship. I can't believe this is my reality now. A mere days ago, I was a princess, mocked for the size of my wolf, but now I'm a prisoner, subjected to daily physical and mental torture. I long for my old life, for the comfort of my family. I would endure my people’s whispered mockery a thousand times over rather than endure this torment.

I hear Ember inhale deeply, and I brace myself for the impending pain courtesy of my monstrous mate. Tears that I didn’t know were there spill from my eyes, staining the table with their bitter trails, mingling with the blood on it.

I hear the crack of the whip, but surprisingly, I don’t feel its

sting. Confused, I shoot my eyes open, and they widen in disbelief at the scene before me. Nickolas has intercepted the whip before it could land on my back. His gaze is filled with anger as he fixes Ember with a piercing stare, his eyes ablaze with fury.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Nickolas's voice booms through the dungeon, demanding an immediate explanation. The guards bow their heads in submission, and Ember visibly squirms, her nervousness evident. Confusion grips my mind as I try to piece together the puzzle. Is there something I'm missing?

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CHAPTER TEN

"Untie her this instant," Nickolas commands, his voice firm. The guard immediately begins to work on the knots binding me, but his hands pause at her words.

"But she bit me," Ember protests, pouting. She extends her hand to Nickolas, revealing the slowly healing wound due to it being a werewolf bite.

"And you think the appropriate response is to whip her?" Nickolas's voice carries a hint of disbelief as he fixes Ember with a piercing stare, his dark brow raised in questioning. Ember's expression falters, and she swallows hard before reluctantly nodding.

A heavy silence settles over the room as Nickolas approaches Ember, his footsteps deliberate and purposeful. He leans in close to her, his lips brushing against her ear as he speaks in a low, almost menacing tone that still reaches my ears.

"I am only going to say this once, Amelia…" Nickolas asserts, his tone steely as he pivots to face me. Our gazes lock, and I find myself trapped in the intensity of his stare. "She is my fucking prisoner, not yours. If she missteps, I'm the one who will mete out punishment, not you," he declares, his words dripping with the irresistible allure of authority.

A bead of sweat trickles down Ember's brow as she nods in silent agreement, the weight of Nickolas's command hanging heavily in the air. A whirlwind of emotions churns within me as I absorb Nickolas's words. He has just labeled me his prisoner. As possessive as he sounded, I can't shake the feeling that it's beyond his control, the mate bond being responsible.

I also can’t believe I misjudged him. From his reaction now, I can tell he didn’t approve of me being whipped, but it still doesn’t

change much between us.

Nickolas moves back toward me, his presence seeming to envelop the room, commanding attention with every step. With practiced ease, he finishes untying the ropes around my hand, his touch sending an unexpected jolt of sensation through my body. A startled yelp escapes my lips as his fingers graze my skin.

Turning me around with a suddenness that catches me off guard, Nickolas's gaze locks onto mine, his eyes burning with an intensity that leaves me breathless. I expect him to help me down from where I'm perched, but instead, he simply watches, his scrutiny penetrating to my core.

I swallow hard, unable to tear my eyes away from his intense stare. His gaze traces over the wounds on my arm, his touch gentle as he brushes his thumb over the damaged skin. A shiver runs down my spine at the contact, my breath catching in my throat as a wave of heat floods my body.

I should be repulsed by his touch, disgusted by the knowledge of what he's done with Ember. But despite my best efforts, I find myself unable to resist the pull of the mate bond that binds us together. The overwhelming desire to push him away, warring with the inexplicable need to draw closer, is a maddening contradiction.

"Please remove your hand," I ask, barely above a whisper, avoiding his gaze as best as possible. I try to ignore the scorching heat of his thumb resting on my arm, the proximity of his touch sending a shiver down my spine.

"Did she do this?" he demands, his voice tight with barely contained fury, pressing his thumb firmly against my skin.

"Yes," I reply softly, unable to meet his intense gaze. I sense his jaw clenching at my admission, his attention snapping toward her with a ferocity that sends a chill down my spine. From where I stand, I can't see the expression on his face, but I feel the pressure on my arm increasing to the point of pain, fearing he might be adding another bruise to my collection.

"You're hurting me," I manage to say, feeling his nail digging into my skin. With deliberate slowness, he withdraws his hand and rises to his full height. When I finally gather the courage to meet his gaze, I find his eyes darkened with anger, a storm brewing beneath the surface. I can't help but wonder what has ignited such fury within him.

My mate's actions once again leave me bewildered. Without a

word, he begins to unbutton his dress shirt, the fabric parting under his skilled fingers. As I watch him, a knot of confusion forms in my stomach, noticing something peculiar. The shirt he's removing is the same one he wore yesterday. A wave of bewilderment washes over me. Does he own multiple identical shirts?

Before I can dwell on that puzzling thought, my eyes widen even further as Nickolas reveals his bare chest. I can't help but be struck by the sight of his chiseled physique, his muscles rippling beneath his taut skin. I scream inwardly. I want to kill the man for cheating on me, but I also want to lick every inch of him right now. I hate how I want him when he is the enemy and the reason for my pain.

But just as I'm about to lose myself in the conflicting emotions swirling within me, Nickolas abruptly throws his shirt across my face, blocking my view of his impressive chest. Startled, I reach out instinctively to catch it.

"Put it on," he instructs, his voice firm, and I comply without hesitation. As I finish buttoning up the shirt, he gestures to the guard and instructs him to assist me to the maid's quarters.

Entering the maid's quarters, the guard hands me over to Beatrice, who then takes me to a room at the far end of the hallway. As we step inside, the overwhelming stench of sex hits me like a physical blow, assaulting my senses and threatening to choke me. I scowl, instinctively recoiling and holding my breath to ward off the suffocating odor. I can't believe this is the room they are giving me.

"This room is where the maids and guards usually have sex, explaining the smell of sweat, cum, and pussy," Beatrice states matter-of-factly, her blunt words causing my cheeks to flush crimson. I've never encountered someone so unabashedly direct before, and I find myself at a loss for words.

"Is there another room I can be given?" I inquire, struggling to mask my discomfort as I hold my nose against the overpowering scent that fills the air.

Beatrice's expression remains impassive as she delivers the unwelcome news. "Yes, but you will have to share with someone, and unfortunately, no one wants to share with the werewolf princess." Her words hang heavy in the air, a harsh reminder of my reality now.

She moves further into the room, pulling the sheet off the makeshift bed against the wall; my stomach churns at the sight of fresh stains marring the fabric. I gag, bile rising in my throat as I

fight to suppress the urge to vomit.

"But I can't stay here," I protest, my hand pressed against my mouth and nose in a desperate attempt to ward off the offensive odor. Though I know I have little say in which room they assign me, I can't help but plead for a reprieve.

"You have no choice," Beatrice replies, her tone stern and unyielding, her face betraying no hint of sympathy or compassion.

"Isn't there anything you could do to help, please?" I implore, desperation creeping into my voice as I search her expression for any sign of leniency or understanding.

"It's not in my..." She starts to say, but my words cut her short with a piercing scream. My heart lurches in my chest as I leap into the air, startled by the sudden commotion. My eyes widen in alarm as I spot a rat scurrying across the room.

Instinctively, I leap into the air and grab onto Beatrice for dear life, clinging to her. She meets my gaze from across the room, her expression still stern despite the chaos unfolding around us. But wait, why did I say "across the room?" I realize with a jolt that my feet aren't even touching the ground.

In that moment of realization, I feel a strong pair of arms wrapping around me, holding me securely against a familiar warmth. I glance down and catch a glimpse of my mate's chest, two buttons undone, before quickly averting my gaze, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment. Swallowing hard, I force myself to meet his eyes, the intensity of his gaze sending a shiver down my spine.

"Please, put me down," I request.

"Sure," Nickolas responds casually, his arms retracting from beneath me. Before I can react, I find myself plummeting to the floor with a startled scream, landing unceremoniously on my backside. Pain shoots through me, both physical and emotional, as I struggle to comprehend why he would drop me so callously.

Grimacing, I glare up at him from the ground, expecting some acknowledgment or apology. But Nickolas simply ignores me, his attention already diverted to Beatrice as he engages her in conversation. Frustration bubbles inside me as I push myself up from the floor, brushing off the dust and debris clinging to my clothes.

As I rise, a repulsive sensation catches my attention, and I instinctively reach behind me, my fingers closing around something

slimy and repugnant. With a gag of disgust, I pluck it from my backside, recoiling at the sight of a used condom. Horrified, I fling it away from me and notice it's the same brand I saw in Ember's room. It seems this particular brand of condom is common in the vampire kingdom.

I glance toward Beatrice and Nickolas, my attention momentarily caught by his attire. Once again, he's clad in the same shirt. I realize that black must indeed be his favorite color.

"Your Majesty, would you spend the night at your uncle’s again?" Beatrice inquires.

"No, I slept so well I almost missed court this morning," Nickolas replies with a hint of satisfaction.

"Alright, Your Majesty, and Lady Ember has been looking for you all day. Should I let her know you have returned to the castle?" Beatrice continues.

"We've met," Nickolas responds curtly, his tone suggesting a desire to avoid any further interaction with Ember.

A furrow creases my brow as I process their exchange. If Nickolas hadn't spent the night at the castle and Ember had been searching for him all day, When the hell did they have sex?

"Amelia," Beatrice's voice interrupts my reverie, pulling me back to the present.

"Yes," I reply, meeting her gaze.

"Follow me," Beatrice instructs. I comply, trailing after her as Nickolas strides past us, exiting the maid's quarters without a backward glance.

Beatrice leads me into another room and informs me we'll be sharing. I take in the simple yet functional setup. Two single beds, adorned with cream sheets and pristine white covers, occupy the corners. A brown cupboard with a pair of lamps rests between them, providing a modest centerpiece. The cream curtains are drawn closed, casting the room in a soft, muted light. An ancient brown wardrobe stands sentinel opposite the bed on the right, while a door marks the opposite corner.

I express my gratitude to Beatrice before hastily making my way to the bathroom, driven by the urgent need to rid myself of the lingering traces of blood and the oppressive atmosphere of the dungeon. The stench of decay seems to cling to my skin, a haunting reminder of the horrors I've witnessed.

As I sink into the warm embrace of the tub, the hot water

provides a welcome respite, soothing my aching muscles and washing away the physical and emotional remnants of the day. But my brief moment of solace is shattered when Beatrice barges into the room without so much as a knock.

Her blatant disregard for my privacy leaves me feeling exposed and vulnerable, a knot of uneasy coiling in the pit of my stomach. I watch in silence as she approaches the tub, her movements fluid and practiced as she begins to cast spells into the water.

"Thank you," I murmur, acknowledging her help even as I bristle at the invasion of my privacy.

"I'm just doing as I was ordered," she replies coolly, her tone betraying no hint of warmth or sympathy. With that, she turns and exits the room, leaving me to ponder the implications of her actions.

I recline in the tub, and my mind wanders back to the conversation between Beatrice and Nickolas before I begin to eavesdrop. I can't help but wonder if their discussion revolved around me and if the spells she cast into the water were somehow connected to their exchange.

But even as I ponder the possible implications of their conversation, a wave of bitterness washes over me. The realization that Nickolas may have expressed concern for my well-being, even if only out of self-interest, fills me with a sense of disillusionment. His wishes for my wounds to heal don't necessarily signify genuine care; rather, they may simply be a pragmatic acknowledgment of my role as a means to an end—a tool to be utilized in his quest to locate my family.

The thought leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, a stark reminder of the precarious position I find myself in. With a heavy sigh, I sink deeper into the water, allowing its soothing embrace to warm me as I steel myself for the challenges that lie ahead.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

NICKOLAS

I make my way back upstairs from the maid's quarters, my mind consumed by thoughts of Amelia's healing wounds. The image of her battered body fills me with a sense of anger and helplessness. I always knew Ember was cruel, but I never imagined she was capable of such wickedness. The fact that she wanted to whip Amelia while she was still recovering is beyond comprehension.

If it weren't for one of my trusted guards informing me that Amelia had been dragged to the dungeon, I shudder to think what might have transpired if I had been a minute late. It's bad enough that I wasn't able to prevent Ava from hurting her. Another torture was the last thing she needed.

I need to find a way to keep Amelia away from Ember before she kills her and ruins my plans. I have come too close to my revenge to lose it. The mere thought of Amelia's injuries has my insides churning and my jaw clenching in frustration. I fucking need to keep Ember away from her.

A knock on my door interrupts my thoughts, and I remove my glasses, settling back in my chair as I invite the person in.

"Good day, Your Majesty," Lord Easterlin Callum greets as he enters my office.

"Hello, Callum. How may I help you?" I inquire, gesturing for him to take a seat.

"I came to ask when you plan to announce to the kingdom your engagement to my daughter," he asks, sitting across from me. His question didn't come as a surprise; I had been expecting it ever since returning with Amelia. Callum must be eager for the kingdom to know so we can proceed with the wedding before the mate bond complicates matters.

"Soon," I reply, attempting to reassure the man.

In truth, Callum has nothing to worry about. Despite the intense pull of the mate bond, I am sure that my feelings for Amelia will never extend beyond wanting to rip her panties off and fuck her until she can't walk. Her face is a constant reminder of a time I'd rather forget, not to mention her familial connection to my father's murderer. There are countless reasons why I could never fall for her, and Callum need not concern himself with any romantic entanglements.

"When, Your Majesty?" Callum presses on, clearly worried.

"Soon," I repeat. The day I agreed to marry that bitch Ember, I knew there was no turning back from it. It was undoubtedly the hardest decision I've ever made in my life. But it was a necessary sacrifice, a strategic move in the ongoing war against my half-brother, Austin.

My half younger brother, Austin, ruled over the vampire kingdom a few years ago. His reckless actions nearly drove our nation to extinction, with countless wars waged against the werewolf nation. He lacked proper preparation and strategy, resulting in defeat after defeat. Yet, he continued to send untrained vampires into battle, resulting in needless bloodshed and loss of life. Also, instead of serving his people, he only fucked every pussy in the kingdom. The kingdom was in turmoil, with no end in sight.

In desperation, some of the lords of the court sought me out, begging me to take over and save them from my brother's tyrannical rule. Austin was displeased by their request and refused to step down for his elder brother, a bastard. Some lords also refused to accept a bastard as their king. Thus, a civil war erupted. They provided troops for Austin, giving him a greater chance at winning the fight until Lord Easterlin came to my aid.

He is one of the kingdom's wealthiest lords, and with him providing troops, the tide of the war turned in my favor. However, it came at a cost. In the heat of battle and the desperate need to save our kingdom, I agreed to marry his daughter, Ember. It was a decision made out of necessity, a sacrifice I made to ensure the survival of my people.

"What about the night of The Bloodmoon Gala? Lords from all covens will be present, and it could bring more joy to the people to know you don't wish to betray them by mating with the enemy," Callum suggests.

"Sure," I reply, resigning myself to his request. I couldn't continue

to refuse him without a valid reason.

"Great, I will arrange everything and make sure my daughter looks her finest that day," he says, rising from his seat. "Goodbye, Your Majesty." With a respectful bow, he exits my office.

As Callum exits my office, leaving me alone with my thoughts, I spin around in my chair and face the windows, gazing out at nothing in particular. There's no denying it now. Ember could very well be my queen. The inevitability of it all hits me like a ton of bricks. I knew this moment was coming, but the reality of it is still hard to swallow.

Ember, my queen. The mere thought of it makes me want to gag. She's the most condescending, evil bitch I've ever had the displeasure of meeting. There's no one more unfit to be queen than her in this entire world, and yet I've just agreed to announce our engagement in two weeks' time. What the fuck did I just do?

I start to realize that perhaps I've been subconsciously stalling all along, unable to come to terms with the horrifying truth. Fuck! I need to find a way to push back. Ember cannot be my fucking queen. Never!

AMELIA

I step out of the bathroom, the warmth of the steam still clinging to my skin after rinsing off all the soap. Beatrice has thoughtfully laid out nightwear for me, and I offer her a grateful smile as I slip it on. Settling under the covers, I'm on the verge of drifting into a peaceful slumber when a knock interrupts the tranquility.

Beatrice climbs out of bed to answer. Their hushed conversation floats back to me as I wait for her to finish talking to the person at the door. Concern prickles at the edges of my consciousness, fearing it might be Ember or Nickolas looking for me.

"Is everything alright?" I inquire as Beatrice returns, clutching a shopping bag in her hand. I hold my breath, hoping against hope that my fears are unfounded.

"Get dressed. You're serving His Majesty in bed tonight," she says, tossing the bag onto the foot of my bed. My chest tightens, and I stare at her in disbelief, silently praying that I misheard.

Beatrice gestures toward the bag, urging me to take a closer look, but I remain frozen, still wishing I had heard wrong.

"Amelia!" she calls, her voice sharp, snapping me out of my daze.

"Yes," I murmur, my voice trembling as I watch Beatrice stride

toward the wardrobe.

"Take the bag!" Beatrice commands, retrieving a robe from the wardrobe. With hands trembling uncontrollably, I reach out and grasp the bag. As I peer inside, my eyes widen in disbelief, and instinctively, I fling it away as though it's suddenly become toxic.

"You're joking, right?" I stammer, disbelief coloring my tone as I continue to stare at the black lingerie scattered across the floor. My heart pounds fiercely in my chest, each beat a drumming reminder of the surreal situation I find myself in.

"The guard will return in a minute to take you to His Majesty's room. I advise you to change before then. His Majesty doesn't like being kept waiting," Beatrice instructs with an air of detachment, walking back to her bed. With a dismissive flick of her wrist, she tosses the robe at me before slipping under her covers, leaving me to grapple with my mounting anxiety in solitude. She doesn't even spare me a glance, seemingly indifferent to my distress.

"There has to be a mistake. Nickolas hates me; he would never want me to serve him in bed," I protest, my voice trembling with disbelief as I continue to stare at the black lingerie on the floor. My heart pounds faster and louder against my chest, its thundering rhythm echoing in the quiet room. I wonder how Beatrice isn't complaining about the noise.

Turning in bed, Beatrice locks gazes with me, her expression stern. "Amelia, you're his mate. You may not feel prepared for it, but your body won't reject him. You will be fine. Now, get dressed!" she orders, her tone brooking no argument.

"But I'm not ready to be with him," I whimper, my voice laced with desperation.

"Once you hear a knock, wear the robe over the lingerie and follow the guard out," she instructs firmly before switching off her nightstand lamp, signaling an end to the discussion.

I drop my gaze, my eyes fixated on the lingerie strewn on the floor. Though Beatrice's words about my body not refusing Nickolas's touch because we are mates ring true, it's not just about physical readiness. Mentally, I'm not prepared for this.

"Amelia, get ready," Beatrice's voice interrupts my thoughts, pulling me back to the present moment.

"Isn't there any way I can get out of this?" I ask, still unable to tear my gaze away from the lingerie.

"No, there isn't, Amelia. The sooner you serve him, the faster you

can move on from it," Beatrice replies with a simplicity that belies the complexity of the situation.

"Everything is going to be alright. He's our mate," Marie reassures me, her voice a comforting presence in my mind.

"I know, but we aren't ready," I admit, my voice trembling with uncertainty.

"I know that too, but I trust our mate. He might hate us, but I doubt he will make such a memorable moment bad," Marie responds with a sense of conviction.

"How do you know?" I inquire, seeking reassurance in her words.

"I just do," she replies simply.

"Hmmm," I murmur, though her confidence fails to fully assuage my fears.

"Trust me," Marie urges before severing our connection, leaving me alone with my thoughts and the daunting prospect of what lies ahead.

Summoning all my courage, I decide to get changed. I'm not putting blind trust in Marie's words; rather, I'm clinging to the hope that I can somehow persuade Nickolas when I see him. With a shaky breath, I climb out of bed. As I strip off my clothes and slip into the delicate lingerie, my hands tremble uncontrollably. The tremors refuse to abate even as I drape the robe over my body.

I startle at the sound of a knock at the door, my heart lurching in my chest. Opening my mouth to plead with Beatrice to intervene, I'm silenced by another rap on the door.

"It's time, Amelia," Beatrice's voice pierces through the haze of my fear. Forcing my limbs to obey, I shuffle toward the door and pull it open. The guard stands there, waiting expectantly. With a silent nod, he gestures for me to follow him before turning on his heel. With every step I take, my heart pounds harder against my rib cage. I wipe away the sweat that beads on my brow, only to realize that my palms are clammy and slick with sweat, too. I clench them into tight fists, willing the trembling to cease. He can't know how terrified I am. Men like him likely thrive on that knowledge.

We arrive at Nickolas’s room, and the guard knocks on the door. With every passing second of silence, my heart pounds louder and faster, the anticipation nearly suffocating me. Then, like a lifeline in the darkness, I hear Nickolas's voice from within: "Come in."

"Everything is going to be fine," I whisper to myself like a mantra, repeating it over and over as I grasp the doorknob and push

open the door, stepping into the room.

The room is engulfed in darkness, save for the flickering glow emanating from the lit fireplace. Turning toward it, I spot Nickolas seated in front of the flames, a glass of whisky in his hand. I stand frozen in my spot, waiting for him to say something to me.

Minutes pass by in eerie silence, the only sound the soft crackle of the fire and the occasional sip of Nickolas's drink. With each passing second, my insides churn. I find myself unconsciously twisting my fingers in front of me, a nervous habit that betrays my inner turmoil as I struggle to gather the courage to speak up. Fuck it!

"Nick—" I begin, only to be abruptly silenced by his sharp command.

"Shut the fuck up!" His words slice through the air like a blade, leaving me speechless. I comply immediately, swallowing back any further attempts at communication, praying I haven't made things worse for myself.

Time seems to stretch endlessly as I stand there, my legs starting to cramp from remaining in one position for so long. Finally, Nickolas's voice fills the room, resonating with a deep baritone British accent that sends shivers cascading down my spine to the very core of my being. I swallow hard, feeling unsettled by the involuntary response my body has to his voice.

"Take off the robe," he commands, his tone brooking no disobedience.

My breath catches in my throat as I lock eyes with him, silently pleading with him to reconsider. Yet, his resolve remains unyielding, each word he uttered earlier solidifying the dread pooling within me. I attempt to gather my voice, but the weight of his gaze stifles any words before they can escape my lips. Never have I seen such menace cloaked in a casual sip of a drink. Every line etched on his face warns of the peril awaiting my defiance. And I don’t dare, so with trembling hands, I reluctantly shed my robe. As it slips to the floor, so too does any semblance of faith in escaping this room unscathed.

The sheer black fabric of the lingerie accentuates every curve, leaving little to the imagination, especially with the delicate floral pattern teasingly veiling my cleavage. My midriff is exposed, the fabric barely concealing my skin, while my core is only shielded by the scant fabric of my underwear. His emerald gaze moves

languidly over my form, tracing a path from the arch of my foot to the expanse of my thighs before settling on my face. A rush of warmth floods through me as his eyes alight with desire, devouring me whole. My knees threaten to buckle as his intense scrutiny renders me powerless. The tension in the air is evident, each heartbeat echoing the primal pull between us. It's as if my body is on fire, craving his touch. I know the mate bond is responsible for my body's reaction because the way my heart pounds, fearing he might go ahead with it, says much.

"Take off everything," his command pierces the air, sending a jolt of fear coursing through me. Despite knowing it was coming, I had secretly hoped he would sense my reluctance and change his mind.

Nickolas raises an eyebrow, his head tilted in question. I quickly move my hand to lower the lingerie strap, but my hands shake, and I can't summon the strength to do it. My heart pounds faster with each passing moment. The thought of taking it off fills me with dread because it means we'll mate, something I'm not ready for. Despite knowing it won't physically hurt, the idea of being intimate with him terrifies me. He's my enemy, maybe even the one who killed my family, and he's caused me immense pain. Even though the mate bond might make my body crave him, my heart refuses to accept him.

“I said fucking take off everything,” Nickolas's loud voice booms in the room, snapping me out of my thoughts. Staring at him, I notice the lust in his eyes is gone and replaced by growing rage.

Tears well up in my eyes. This moment was meant to be filled with love and longing, his eyes reflecting desire, not seething with anger. With a heavy heart, I gasp as a tear escapes, trailing down my cheek.

“I said, take it off,” he yells once more, now standing in front of me, his chest heaving with pent-up fury.

More tears spill from my eyes, their salty tracks marking the anguish etched on my face. I inhale sharply as Nickolas's hands move with brutal force, tearing the delicate fabric from my body and leaving me exposed in nothing but my underwear. My knees buckle beneath me, unable to withstand the weight of my despair, and I collapse to the unforgiving ground, consumed by sobs wracking my body. The crushing realization settles in that no one will come to my rescue, leaving me to face my impending doom alone.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

"Get up!" His bark pierces the air, his presence casting a menacing shadow over me. I remain frozen, my body trembling uncontrollably as desperate wails tear from my throat. Curling into myself, I draw my knees to my chest, seeking whatever semblance of protection I can muster. I silently pray it doesn't hurt, just as Beatrice assured me.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, no one is fucking you tonight. I'd rather let a man fuck me than do that." His words land like a crushing blow, the shock evident on my slackened expression. In a surprising act of gentleness, he crouches down, lifting me effortlessly and draping me over his shoulder. My mind reels in disbelief.

Did he really just say that?

He strides toward his bed, and I still brace myself for what is to come next, my heart pounding with a mix of dread and uncertainty. He tosses me onto the mattress, and instinctively, I sit up, drawing my knees close to my chest for a semblance of protection. My gaze locks with his, silently demanding an explanation for his earlier shocking remark. However, as I observe him, I catch his eyes lingering on my exposed thighs, sending a shiver down my spine. Hastily, I reach for the nearby covers, clutching them tightly and wrapping them around my trembling form, using them as a shield against his penetrating emerald-green gaze.

He scowls as he forcefully yanks the covers away, leaving me vulnerable to the biting chill of the night air. I recoil instinctively, huddling into myself once more. Fear grips me tightly, gnawing at my insides as I worry that my attempt to shield myself may have inadvertently altered his intentions regarding our mating.

"Drop your legs and spread them," he commands, freezing me in place. My heart plummets, fresh tears welling up in my eyes,

confusion and fear intertwining within me. I had dared to hope that his earlier words meant he wouldn't go through with it. Why the sudden change of heart?

"The fucking waters again," he mutters with exasperation, frustration evident in the furrow of his brow as he pinches the bridge of his nose. "Just do as I have asked, Amelia, and stop fucking crying."

"Please," I plead, my voice choked with emotion, tears streaming down my cheeks unchecked.

Nickolas disregards my pleas, forcefully prying my legs from my chest and spreading my thighs apart despite my desperate attempts to resist. Frantically, I attempt to bring my legs back together to shield myself from his invasive touch, but the steely resolve etched across his face freezes me in place. His clenched fists and the hard set of his jaw convey a silent warning, daring me to defy him further.

A chill runs down my spine as his gaze meets mine, sending a shiver of dread through my body. I shrink back into the mattress, feeling as though I'm sinking into an abyss of despair. The intensity of his stare feels suffocating, every fiber of my being screaming that tonight, he intends to do me harm.

"I'm going to spread your legs, and if you dare try to pull them together again, I will go back on my word and fuck you," his threat hangs in the air like a dark cloud, sending a chill coursing through my veins. I swallow hard, the lump in my throat feeling like an insurmountable obstacle. I resign myself to his command, letting him do as he wishes.

His hand moves to my thigh, hovering dangerously close to my core. I draw in a sharp breath, feeling the heat of his touch searing my skin. His talons extend; they gently caress my skin, sending sparks of fire dancing across my flesh, a stark contrast to the fear coiling in the pit of my stomach.

I watch him intently, my lips parting in silent disbelief, trying to decipher his intentions. His hands move with a deliberate slowness across my core, his touch feather-light, yet electrifying. My core clenches involuntarily, a wave of embarrassment washing over me at the intensity of my reaction to such a seemingly small action.

Staring blankly at the ceiling, I'm consumed by confusion and apprehension. He claimed he wouldn't mate with me, so why is he toying with me like this? The mixed signals leave me feeling adrift

in a sea of uncertainty, my mind racing with unanswered questions.

I grimace, a sharp sting slicing through the haze of confusion as I feel a searing pain on my thigh. Lowering my gaze, I discover a jagged cut marring my skin, crimson droplets staining the pristine sheets beneath me. Disbelief courses through me as I watch Nickolas pull his talons to his lip and lick my blood off them. He moans, sending a chill down my spine.

"Nick..." I begin, my voice trailing off as he abruptly throws the covers over my face, cutting me off mid-sentence. I yank the covers away and watch him retreat to the fireplace. His back turned to me as he refills his glass with nonchalant ease, taking a leisurely sip as if nothing out of the ordinary had just occurred.

I glance around the room, wondering what the hell just happened. Wetting my lips nervously, I muster the courage to gently call out his name, hoping to seek clarity without provoking his ire and inviting his return.

"It's Your Majesty to you," he snaps, his tone sharp as his gaze pierces through me with an intensity that sends a shiver down my spine.

I swallow hard, the lump in my throat betraying my nervousness. "Forgive me, Your Majesty," I reply, the words tasting bitter on my tongue as I reluctantly acknowledge the formality he demands.

I'm not entirely surprised by his insistence on formality, considering we are enemies. In hindsight, I should have anticipated it.

"You can leave in an hour," he states casually, taking a sip of his drink.

"Okay," I respond quietly, choosing not to press for an explanation of the unsettling encounter. With a heavy sigh, I sink back onto the bed, resigned to wait out the passage of time in uneasy silence.

An hour later, Nickolas lets me leave with his scent clinging to my skin like it was mine, probably due to spending an hour in his bed. I walk back to my room with a heavy heart, the weight of the past hour's events pressing down on me like a suffocating cloak, and the cut on my thigh healed.

Upon entering, I find Beatrice sound asleep, her peaceful slumber a stark contrast to the turmoil raging within me. Silently, I make my way to the bathroom to wash off the blood on my thighs. Stepping

out once I’m done, I slip into my nightgown. Climb into bed and pull the covers snugly around me, seeking solace in the embrace of sleep. With a silent prayer whispered to the heavens, I close my eyes tightly, desperately hoping I won’t open my eyes until morning breaks. I think I have had enough for one day.

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The following morning, I slowly stretch my limbs, blinking against the morning light filtering through the window. My curiosity piqued, I squint my eyes at the door, trying to catch a glimpse of whomever Beatrice is speaking to. However, before I can discern their identity, she closes the door and approaches me with a bottle of pills in her hand.

"Good morning," I greet with a yawn, covering my mouth with my hand as I sit up.

"Here you go," Beatrice says, placing a pill in my palm.

"What's this for?" I inquire, studying the small tablet she's given me.

"It's plan B, and these are your birth control pills," she explains. "Take them if you don't want the king to have both our heads." She offers me a strained smile before handing over the bottle of pills.

Her words send a chill down my spine, and I swallow hard, accepting the bottle of pills. I consider telling her that I don't need them but decide against it. The fact that Nickolas instructed her to give them to me speaks volumes. It's clear he doesn't want Beatrice to know that we didn't mate last night, but why? It doesn’t make sense.

"Thank you," I murmur, accepting the glass of water she offers. Popping the morning-after pill, I set the bottle of birth control pills on my nightstand. These medications aren't your run-of-the-mill human prescriptions; they've been specially crafted to work on supernatural bodies. It's a sign of the times—many young supernaturals no longer wait for their mates before having sex. In response, our doctors have had to adapt, ensuring that only planned children come into this world.

I shower and dress in the white and purple floral print dress Beatrice selected for me. The dress fits so well that it makes me wonder if they planned to hold me prisoner all along. I trail after her to the kitchen.

It's not surprising that there's a kitchen in the castle; after all,

many witches reside in vampire territory, and they often work in the palace. Ava, their queen, lives in vampire territory as well, further cementing their presence here.

As I take in the sights of the kitchen, the atmosphere is markedly different from any ordinary culinary space. The gleaming countertops and modern appliances are juxtaposed against the ancient stone walls and gothic archways characteristic of a vampire castle. Shadows dance ominously in the corners, casting an eerie pall over the room. Despite the eerie ambiance, there's an undeniable air of luxury and sophistication. Intricately carved wooden cabinets line the walls, their surfaces adorned with intricate motifs reminiscent of centuries past.

"Thank you." I express my gratitude to Beatrice as she sets down a plate of eggs, bacon, and toast before me. It's clear she had to cook this breakfast specifically for me, as there are no leftovers in sight. The hisses and glares I receive upon entering the kitchen suggest that my presence is not exactly welcomed, and it was intentional. If glares could kill, I'd be dead a thousand times over by now.

It makes me ponder whether, hypothetically if Nickolas and I were to somehow overcome our hatred and choose to be together, whether his people would ever accept me. I doubt it. Even the witches, who are typically more tolerant, seem to despise my presence. I doubt vampires would ever accept me even if I were…I refrain from voicing the word, the weight of it heavy on my tongue. Deep sighs escape me as I contemplate this reality, realizing that this aspect of myself likely wouldn't make a difference here.

I quickly finish my meal and make a swift exit from the kitchen before the hostile atmosphere suffocates me entirely. I bid Beatrice goodbye and make my way back to my room. On my way, a guard comes to tell me Ember is looking for me and has asked me to go to her room. With a deep sigh, I begin to proceed there.

Getting to her room, I knock multiple times but get no response. Slowly, with my heart pounding, I turn her doorknob. I pray she won’t have my head for entering without being asked. I gasp, stepping into the room and finding it in a state far worse than when I left yesterday. My breath catches in my throat as I take in the scene before me. The room is a complete disaster zone as if a tornado had torn through it with unrelenting fury.

The vanity table lies shattered, its glass mirror scattered across

the floor like a mosaic of destruction. The bed is now a chaotic mess, with pillows torn open and cotton strewn about like snowfall. Every corner of the room bears the mark of Ember's wrath—lamps overturned, tables upended, and curtains torn to shreds. If I didn't know the bitch was a vampire and a female, I would assume she went feral on a full moon as an unmated alpha male does. What the hell happened last night?

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Ember's voice cuts through, startling me as she emerges from a corner of the room. She looks like a wreck, her eyes red and swollen, dark circles prominent beneath them. Mascara stains streak her cheeks, evidence of tears shed in anguish.

"You asked for—" I begin, but she cuts me off with a sharp accusation.

"Is that my old dress you're wearing?" Her tone is accusatory, her words laced with venom as she closes the distance between us.

"I don't know."

"First, you take his cock. Now you want to take my fucking clothes too?" Ember screams, her anger palpable as her face flushes with rage.

"I didn't know it was yours," I say, realizing now why the dress fits me so well. We're practically the same size.

"Take it off," she demands, her arms crossed tightly over her chest as she glares at me, her impatience evident.

"Can I have something to change into?" I ask before taking it off because the last thing I want is to step out of here only in my underwear.

"No!" Her response is swift and uncompromising.

"Then I can't," I retort.

"Do I look like I'm playing, bitch? Take it off!" Ember's voice rises to a crescendo, her anger boiling over. I do nothing in response to her command. She laughs bitterly, closing the distance between us until her breath is hot against my ear. "If you want me to beat your fucking ass harder than I did yesterday, you'll still be wearing that dress when I step away."

My blood chills. I might have healed from the beating, but it doesn't mean all the evidence of what happened faded. The pain I felt was still fresh in my mind. I quickly unzip the dress and step out of it.

I grit my teeth and begin to peel off the dress, each movement

accompanied by a sharp pang of humiliation. As much as I resent giving in to Ember's demands, I know she holds all the power in this situation. Yesterday, I was fortunate that Nickolas intervened, but today, I might not be so lucky.

"Now get out and make sure this is the last time I ever see you in my room," Ember commands once the dress is off, and I'm left standing there in my underwear.

Taking a deep breath, I steel myself for what lies ahead. My insides churn with a mixture of humiliation and anger as I slowly approach the exit. The thought of walking out wearing nothing but my underwear fills me with a sense of profound discomfort. I grasp the doorknob, but my hand hesitates, unable to find the strength to pull it open. I'm a princess, fuck it. I shouldn't be seen in my underwear.

Throwing my head back in frustration, I sigh heavily, lamenting the sudden turn my life has taken in a matter of days. Before I can dwell on it further, Ember interrupts my thoughts by hurling something in my direction. Thanks to my werewolf reflexes, I narrowly avoid being struck. With a quick turn, I step out of the room, Ember's enraged screams echoing behind me as I make my hasty exit.

I release a breath of relief as I step away from Ember's room, the tension in my muscles slowly easing. But as I look down at my nearly bare body, panic begins to rise within me once again. I can't possibly walk back to my room like this. What the hell am I going to do?

Rubbing my arms in a futile attempt to ward off the chill that settles over me, I realize I have no choice but to make a run for it rather than risk freezing to death at her door. With a deep breath, I steel myself for the inevitable and start to move away from Ember's door.

However, before I can take more than a few steps, a strong hand grabs my arm, halting me in my tracks. Startled, I lift my eyes to meet the gaze of the person and see it’s Nickolas, his expression inscrutable as he stares at me, his nostrils flaring and his knuckles turning white with tension. A sinking feeling settles in the pit of my stomach as I realize this is not good.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Where are your clothes?" Nickolas's voice cuts through the tense silence, his grip on my arm still firm and causing a sharp pain to shoot through me. Despite the discomfort, I refrain from speaking, knowing that it’s best not to say anything to make the situation worse.

"Ember took them," I respond truthfully, not hesitating to divulge the facts of the matter. After all, it's not as though Nickolas would take any action against her for her actions.

"Hmm, she did," Nickolas murmurs, more to himself than to me, his grip tightening further before he finally releases me. I massage the tender area where his fingers had dug in, silently waiting for him to speak further. To my surprise, he doesn't reprimand me or demand further explanations. Instead, he disappears momentarily, only to return with my dress—or rather, Ember's dress—in hand.

My brows knit together in confusion as Nickolas offers me the garment; his actions are unexpected and leave me at a loss for words. Did he just get the dress back from her?

"This is the last time I should ever see you in your underwear," Nickolas asserts sternly, his gaze piercing as I slip into the dress.

"Yes, Your Majesty," I respond.

"The last thing I need is for everyone to be fucking gawking at your body," he continues, his tone laced with frustration. Once the dress is on, he closes the distance between us, his hand moving to the back of my neck and enveloping it in a firm yet strangely comforting grip. He tilts my head upward, forcing me to meet his intense gaze. I find myself locked in a silent exchange, captivated by the mesmerizing depths of his emerald eyes. Despite his flaws, there's an undeniable allure to his gaze that I can't ignore. "Stay away from Ember. Do you hear me?" he instructs, his voice

brooking no argument. I nod in understanding. "Good. The last thing I need is for her to fucking kill you before I've made use of you," he adds, his words cutting deeper than they should. As he begins to walk away, I halt him with my words.

"I, Amelia Anderson, reject Nickolas Adams II as my mate," I declare, my voice trembling with frustration. Enough is enough. I don't know why I didn't reject him the second I arrived here. What was I stalling for? Nickolas and I don't stand a chance of being together. It's better to feel immense pain now than endure it in small doses every time we cross paths. His statement shouldn't push me to reject him, but with everything that's been happening, I've reached my breaking point.

I watch as the muscles in his back tense, a silent indication of the impact of my words, but he doesn't turn back to face me. Instead, he delivers a cutting response without so much as a glance in my direction.

"Accepting your rejection would be doing you a favor, and that's the last thing I would ever do for you," he retorts before walking away, leaving me standing alone.

My blood boils with a hatred I've never felt before. "Fuck!" I scream, the sound echoing off the walls. Why won't he just set me free? Why does he insist on torturing me like this? "Ahh!" I cry out, pressing my palms against my face. My life couldn't possibly get any worse. Tears well up in my eyes, and my nose starts to sting. I throw my head back, letting out a heavy sigh. I don't deserve this.

"You don't," Marie says softly, her voice thick with emotion.

"You mean 'we' don't deserve it, Marie," I correct her, tears streaming down my face.

"I wouldn't normally agree with you about rejecting him, but these past few days have been unbearable," Marie admits, her voice filled with sorrow.

"What did we do to deserve a mate like him, Marie?" I ask, my voice breaking as I sniffle, tears continuing to flow.

"I don't know, Amelia," she responds, her heart as broken as mine.

Taking a deep breath, I wipe away my tears and turn toward the stairs. With heavy steps, I make my way down to my room, where I'll continue to cry over the miserable existence that seems to have just begun.

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Later in the day, at Beatrice's insistence, I reluctantly leave my room. She found me in tears a few minutes ago, commenting on my bloodshot eyes and pale complexion, likening me to a ghost who had endured a rough day. Despite my protests, she insisted that I needed some sunlight and practically dragged me to the gardens.

Before leaving, I changed into a different dress, ensuring that it wasn't one of Ember's. The brown satin short A-line dress fit me just as well as the others, albeit showing slightly less cleavage around the chest area.

As I walk into the gardens, my thoughts wander to my family, wondering how they're faring without me. I miss them dearly and hope they're doing well. There's a longing to reach out to my sister-in-law, but I hesitate, unsure if it's the right decision.

Beatrice interrupts my thoughts with a quick word to the gardeners before leading me toward the stables. Despite the beauty of the flowers surrounding us, my sour mood prevents me from admiring them. My mind remains preoccupied with worries and concerns, overshadowing the serenity of the garden.

Stepping into the stable grounds, my attention is immediately drawn to a magnificent stallion. I approach the horse with caution, mindful not to startle the animal or risk harm to either of us. "Hello there," I greet the beautiful black horse, who responds with a soft grunt and a shake of his head. "Would you mind if I touched you?" I inquire, closing the distance between us and gently placing my hand on his sleek coat. To my relief, he seems to accept my touch, so I begin to softly pat him. Animals have always held a special place in my heart, even though I am a werewolf. They offer solace and companionship in times of need.

Closing my eyes, I lean my head against the horse, cherishing this moment of peace and connection amidst the turmoil of my thoughts.

"He must really like you," Eric comments, his voice pulling me out of my moment of tranquility. I turn around to find him mounted on a beautiful brown horse.

"He isn't usually this friendly with strangers," he adds, dismounting and handing the reins to the stable hand before approaching me.

"I guess I got lucky," I reply, continuing to pat the stallion's side.

"I can see that. Do you want to take him for a ride?" Eric offers, now standing beside the horse.

"Could I?" I ask, surprised by the invitation and the trust placed in me.

"Yes, I don't think Nickolas would have a problem with it," he assures me.

"But aren't you worried I might try to run away?" I narrow my eyes at him half-jokingly. He smirks, his confidence unwavering.

"Love, you haven't seen a vampire in full speed. We would catch you even before you reached the palace borders," he says, moving closer until his face is inches from mine. "I advise you not to try it if you value the freedom you have now." With that, he pulls away, leaving me to digest his warning.

Swallowing hard, I nod in understanding. It seems my escape plans will have to wait for another time, especially with Eric likely to have the guards on high alert during the horse ride. But regardless of that, a horse ride won't be bad. The thought of the wind in my hair and the sun on my face is enticing, but I decline Eric's offer.

"I would love to, but unfortunately, I'm not dressed for it," I explain, gesturing to my attire.

"Then tomorrow, right after you have breakfast," Eric suggests, his tone leaving no room for argument.

"Sure," I agree, a smile spreading across my face at the prospect of indulging in something I love in the midst of the challenges of my current situation.

At night, Nickolas asks for me. Unlike yesterday, I'm not anxious about how the night will unfold. Even though I have no desire to see him, I know I have no say in it. Knocking softly, I wait for his permission before stepping into his room. I enter and find him seated by a working desk near the window, a detail I hadn't noticed before.

The moonlight casts a soft glow, illuminating every feature of his handsome face as he focuses on his work. I watch as he adjusts his glasses on the bridge of his nose, and I can't help but notice how they add to his allure, even if I wish he didn't. There's just something undeniably captivating about the way they frame his eyes, accentuating their intensity and adding a touch of sophistication to his appearance.

Yet, as I observe him, a question lingers in the back of my mind:

why would a vampire, with their renowned vision, need glasses in the first place? It's a curious thought, one that I can't quite shake as I continue to watch him work, his concentration unwavering despite my silent musings. Vampires are supposed to have the second-best vision after werewolves.

"Take off your clothes and hop into the bed," he commands, snapping me from my thoughts.

"Why are you putting on a show that we are mating?" I ask, my curiosity piqued by his odd actions. It doesn't take me long to figure out that's what he's doing, but I can't seem to understand why.

"Take off your damn clothes and get on the fucking bed," he retorts, ignoring my question.

"I would love to know why," I persist, my curiosity getting the better of me.

"Amelia!" he interrupts sharply, banging his fist against the table. I flinch, stumbling back a few feet at the force of his outburst. He lifts his head from the papers in front of him, glaring at me through the rim of his glasses, his frustration palpable.

"I'll get undressed right away," I respond, turning away from him and making my way toward the bed.

“Sometimes I wonder what I did to get mated to a child like you,” he says under his breath, but I hear it.

"Did you just call me a child?" I ask, spinning around to face him, my voice edged with disbelief.

"I believe your werewolf abilities are still there," he responds coolly, his tone implying that my age is irrelevant.

"If you don't know, I'm twenty-two years old. I am not a child," I retort, my frustration growing despite my efforts to remain composed. The insult strikes a nerve, and I can't help but defend myself.

"That's a child to me," he counters, his expression unyielding, leaving me baffled and increasingly exasperated by his stance.

“I am not a child,” I assert, my voice rising slightly above its normal tone. The words escape my lips with a firmness that belies the hurt I feel at his remark.

"Did you just fucking raise your voice at me?" he demands, his tone sharp as he tilts his head to the side, his brow raised in disbelief.

"No, I didn't," I reply quickly, shaking my head in denial. I can't believe I allowed myself to raise my voice. Am I on a death wish or

what?

Before I can dwell on my impulsive response any longer, Nickolas is suddenly right in front of me, his hand firmly around my neck. I gasp in surprise, my back arching as he backs me into the closest wall. Instinctively, I place my hand above his, but I don't pull it away, recognizing that he isn't choking me.

His scent envelops me, wrapping around me like a warm blanket, and I feel a sense of warmth spreading through my chest. As I glance down, I notice his arm resting between my breasts, the proximity sending a jolt of electricity coursing through me. Despite the tension between us, there's an undeniable intimacy in the moment, leaving me breathless and unsure of what to do next.

I catch a glimpse of his chest as he stands before me, two buttons undone on his shirt. The sight ignites a primal urge within me, my fingers tingling with the desire to explore his bare torso and trace the contours of his abs. Why does my mate have to be so irresistibly sexy? It feels so unfair.

"Never, I mean never dare raise your voice at me again. I will end your worthless life without hesitation," he warns, his hot breath fanning my face, sending shivers down my spine and causing more heat to pool in my body, centering at my core.

I resist the urge to react impulsively, forcing myself to remain composed despite the surge of emotions coursing through me. Instead, I lift my gaze to the ceiling, rolling my eyes in frustration. Damn you, mate bond! I curse inwardly, resenting the intense connection that binds us.

"Do you understand?" he demands, pinching my neck lightly. I drop my eyes, locking gazes with him as his intense green orbs bore into mine. I nod silently.

He releases his grip on my neck, his gaze dropping to my chest. I follow his line of sight, and my eyes widen in horror as I realize what he's looking at. My nipples are perked, betraying the arousal coursing through my body despite the tense situation.

Feeling utterly mortified, I quickly pull my hands over my breasts, attempting to hide the evidence of my arousal. Oh, heavens! Can this night get any worse? I curse inwardly, feeling a flush of embarrassment creeping up my neck. Why the hell are my nipples perked right now? I can't help but wonder, desperately wishing for a way to escape the awkwardness of the moment.

I lift my eyes and notice Nickolas still looking at me, his

expression unreadable. Feeling flustered, I quickly turn away, intending to put some distance between us. However, in my haste, I forget that there's only a wall behind me, and I end up banging my head into it with a sharp thud.

"Fuck!" I cry out, instinctively placing my hand on my trembling forehead, the pain shooting through me like a bolt of lightning. I feel a throbbing ache spreading across my head as I try to steady myself against the wall, embarrassed by my own clumsiness in front of him.

“And when I call her a child, she throws a tantrum,” he mutters, walking away from me with a dismissive air.

I let out a frustrated sigh and facepalm, feeling utterly exasperated by the turn of events. Why does nothing seem to go my way?

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NICKOLAS

"She knows," I tell Eric, taking a sip of bourbon lounging in a brown armchair beside the crackling fireplace. The warm glow paints the living room in comforting hues. Eric leans forward, his own glass in hand.

"Which 'she'?"

"Amelia," I respond, taking another sip, my throat tightening at her name.

"How does she know?"

“I don’t know, but tonight she questioned me about it.”

“She’s sharp. It only took her the second time to figure it out.”

“Let’s hope she knows how to shut her mouth and doesn’t mess up the plan.”

“I don’t think she has anyone to spill to. Nothing to worry about.”

“Beatrice is her roommate. She might tell her, and as much as I trust Beatrice, I can't be sure she won't betray me for the right reasons.”

“Beatrice has known you half your life. I doubt she'd ever betray you.”

“Regardless, I need to make sure she keeps her mouth shut, and I have no idea how.”

"Do something nice for her," Eric insists, his tone softening slightly.

"Something nice?" I echo, my brows furrowing in confusion. "Like what?"

“Yesterday, I found her in the stables. She loves horses and

enjoys riding. Give her full access to the stables; let her ride whenever she wants.” I pause, wondering if he's lost his fucking mind.

“What?” he questions.

“Sometimes I ask myself how you're my legal advisor.”

“Fuck you,” he says, chuckling.

“Your idea is the dumbest thing you've ever said.”

“It's not. I've thought about her using it to escape and figured out how to prevent that.”

“Enlighten me.” I set my glass down and lean back, ready to hear him out.

"If we get an earth witch to cast a spell on her, making the earth attack if she strays more than one thousand feet from the palace, I reckon we're in the clear." I ponder, resting my hand under my chin.

"Hmm, didn't cross my mind."

"Of course not. You forget earth witches aren’t only used to block other witches from finding people; they're also handy for keeping people from leaving certain places."

Earth witches can perform the spell he mentioned. That's how we've kept Amelia's family from tracking her. Normally, I would use it to my advantage. However, if they locate her, they could infiltrate and exit the castle before I catch wind of it, and I'll lose my sole means of finding them for revenge.

"With all the shit I have to deal with as being king, I believe I have the fucking right to forget some witch abilities."

"Sure, it gives you a pass. Speaking of being king, how's Lord Easterlin taking to you fucking your mate? I presume not too well," Eric remarks, sipping his drink.

"He hasn't voiced his displeasure yet, but I know it's only a matter of time."

"And his daughter? Must be having a fit."

"Her room took the brunt of it."

"Expected from a lady like her." Eric rises, heading to refill his glass. Before leaving, he adds, "Before I forget, I've already granted Amelia the right to ride tomorrow. I suggest finding that earth witch tonight before dawn."

I cross my arms, gaze fixed on him, sighing deeply. He smiles and leaves the room.

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The next day, during my annual morning council meeting, I try to drown out the relentless chatter of the old council members nagging about the necessity of a queen. I know Lord Easterlin is behind this, worried I might renege on making his daughter the queen. He should be concerned because once I find a way to dispose of him and gain full control of his troops, I will.

While pretending to listen, my attention drifts to the window, and there she is—Amelia. Dressed in a sundress, she bathes in the sunlight, an infuriating glow surrounding her. My jaw clenches at the sight of her closing her eyes and sighing deeply. Amelia doesn't resemble a prisoner; how comfortable she appears is enraging. Her skin shouldn't radiate under the sun. Even that fucking sad smile on her face shouldn’t be there. Despair should be the only emotion in her eyes. I clench my fists, blood boiling at how she looks like a fucking angel right now. I need to fix this, make her suffer for her ancestor's crimes. She's had enough freedom. Fuck what Eric said last night; I'll use fear to shut her mouth. She needs a reminder of why she's still alive.

"We know you've found your mate, but it doesn't change anything. A werewolf has no place as queen," Lord Kinderman interrupts, pulling me from my thoughts. I'm about to respond when Eric speaks on my behalf.

"The king knows of this, and that’s not why he hasn’t declared his wishes to marry Lord Easterlin’s daughter to the kingdom. He wishes to revenge his father's death before he settles down and bears an heir."

"What if we lose the king in the war? How will we survive without even a queen?" Lord Goleman questions. I beat Eric to reply this time.

"Are you wishing death upon me, Lord Goleman?" I inquire, tilting my head as I assess the old man, equivalent to fifty years or more in human age.

His eyes widened in fear.

"I would never, my king," he hastily clarifies, bowing his head. Smirking, I sit up.

"I've heard your complaints. If there's nothing else, the meeting is adjourned for today."

"My king, you need to decide today. The Bloodmoon Gala is in a few days," Lord Kinderman insists. I ignore him, leaving with Eric.

"Why didn't he attend today's meeting?" I ask Eric as we walk.

"Lord Easterlin came down with a fever this morning," he replies. I stop and face Eric with a pointed look. We are vampires. We don't fucking get fevers. He lifts his hand in surrender. "His words, not mine."

"This is the second time he's missed, right?"

"Yes."

"No problem. I'll visit him. He is, after all, my hand, and without him, the kingdom will fall. I might as well check on him and find out how a vampire as old as time got a fucking fever."

Leaving the castle a few minutes later, I make my way to Lord Easterlin's estate. Stepping out of the car, I adjust my Amari suit. Observing the building before me, I can't shake the sense of familiarity between his mansion and the royal castle.

Today is the first time I've truly looked at the structure of his house. It's also my first daytime visit; I've only attended nighttime parties here before. The creak of the grand mahogany door pulls my attention from the building's walls to the manor's doors. Watching the butler's reaction, I see him pale at the sight of me. His hazel eyes widen before he hurriedly bows his head.

"Your Majesty, forgive me for not welcoming you properly. My lord didn't inform me to expect you today." Jon, Lord Easterlin's butler, says.

"It's fine, Jon. I, too, didn't know I was coming today," I respond as I enter the grand manor, Eric trailing behind, accompanied by two guards. While unnecessary, it's customary for the king always to have guards.

"I'll quickly inform my lord of your arrival," Jon hurries toward the stairs, but I halt him in his tracks.

"No need, Jon. I'd love to visit your master in his sick bed. He's down with a fever, so ill he can't even get out of bed, right?" I ask, arching my brows at him. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows hard. He parts his lips to reply, but I don't give him the chance. I walk past him, ignoring his protests that his master should be the one to come down and visit me.

We ascend the grand staircase to the third floor, and Eric moves ahead of me to open the door to Callum's room once we arrive. My nose scrunches as the smell of various herbs hits me. As I walk further in, the sight before my eyes makes me question my immortality.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Callum’s face is pale, drained of all color. He wets his cracked lips and utters, "My King," His voice hoarse. Attempting to sit up as I approach, he fails, thumping back into the bed. I notice the wet towel on his forehead, and a water witch by his left seems to be treating him. She bows in respect, and I wave her off.

“How?” I ask, standing by the foot of his bed, finger on my nose to block the pungent smell of the healing herbs.

"I pissed off a witch."

"And she made you sick?" I question, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes."

"Hmm, I didn’t know they could do that."

"Me neither. I'm sorry, Your Majesty, for missing court these past two days, but as you can see, I'm actually sick."

"Yes, I can see that, Lord Easterlin. I wish you a quick recovery."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. Don’t worry; I'll be fine before The Bloodmoon Gala. It’s an important day for my daughter, and no witch sickness will stop me from attending."

I nod, not expecting such confidence. He doesn't seem concerned, even though rumors of me fucking Amelia are spreading. I narrow my eyes at him, wondering why he's so sure I won’t change my mind about making his daughter the crown princess during the Bloodmoon Gala. People often develop feelings while fucking one another, and that's what I'm counting on to unsettle him. I can't help but wonder why he isn't affected. Hmm.

"Take care, Lord Easterlin. I will arrange for the best healers to be sent to your manor as soon as possible," I say, turning to leave his room.

"Thank you, Your Majesty, and forgive me for not seeing you out," he says as I exit his room.

Eric walks over to my side, and we share a look as we descend the stairs. He must've noticed how calm and certain Lord Easterlin sounded about me announcing his daughter as the crown princess. We walk outside and get into the car.

"He didn't even request an audience alone with you to discuss Amelia," Eric comments, settling into the back seat after I do while the guards take the driver and passenger seats.

"I know, it's as if he didn't even instruct his minions to lecture me about how I shouldn't be fucking her," I reply, talking freely as the guards are men I trust with my life.

"I feel he's up to something."

"I fear the same."

"You need to find out what, and quickly, because knowing Lord Easterlin, you don't want to find out too late."

"Of course, I know that, but how? The bastard has killed every spy I placed in his household in the past years."

"Then use someone he wouldn't suspect."

"Like who?"

"Amelia."

"Amelia?" I repeat, looking at Eric as if he just suggested the most absurd thing.

"Let me explain."

Eric spends the rest of the drive back to the palace laying out his plan. I'm impressed by how his mind works and hope his strategy works.

AMELIA

I twist my fingers, walking to my mate's office late at night. He didn't call me to his room, which worries me. My day was good; I spent it riding with Eric, who, despite being a vampire, I actually enjoy being around. He didn't make much conversation, but it was nice to be with someone who wasn't plotting my death in a myriad of ways like everyone else here. I am praying my night also ends well.

I exhale, finally reaching Nickolas's office door. Turning the doorknob, I cautiously poke my head in before summoning the courage to guide my body through the door. My mate sits behind a desk, his glasses perched on the bridge of his nose and papers scattered in front of him. It's a reminiscent sight, much like how he looked on the second night he called me to his room. His raven-

black hair is tousled as though he's run his hands through it countless times today. The atmosphere carries a hint of déjà vu, and a subtle tension lingers in the air. He reclines in his chair, peering at me through those glasses that somehow elevate his attractiveness to a whole new level. The way they frame his eyes adds an intriguing allure, making him look hotter than usual for some inexplicable reason.

Not for some inexplicable reason. You know why? Marie says, opening the connection between us.

I don't.

He looks like the men in all those human novels you love to read. The age gap ones, she says and it hits me.

Yeah, you are right. He does. He gives off the perfect daddy vibe.

Yes, which is exactly your type. The universe couldn't give you a more perfect mate.

Just because I enjoy those books doesn't mean he is my type.

Yeah, right, she huffs.

"Amelia," Nickolas calls, pulling me away from my conversation with Marie.

"Yes, Daddy," I reply, my eyes widening once I realize what I said.

"Daddy ?" Nickolas says, lifting a brow at me as he tilts his head to the side.

"I'm so sorry. I don't know why I said that." I cover my face with my palm, embarrassed. I don't understand why these things keep happening with my mate.

"I didn't pick you for the kind of girl into such." He stares at me with a new kind of profound interest. I don't know if I should be happy or worried.

"Into what?" I ask, confused, but then understand what he is talking about and quickly squash his assumptions. "No! That's not what I meant. I don't see you that way. If anything, I see you as a monster." I facepalm the second I realize what I'd just said. Did someone sign my death today because what the fuck is going on?

"Hmm, I see."

"Please don't kill me. I don't see you as a monster." I lie through my teeth because I see him as a very hot monster, but he doesn't need to know that.

"Amelia, I couldn't care less about how you see me because whatever kink you were into, it doesn't matter because I would

never fulfill them."

Ouch! His words hit me like a physical blow, and my heart clenches painfully. The sincerity in his tone resonates through my bones. In that moment, I can't help but entertain a disheartening thought—will I die a virgin?

“Sit down. I have a job for you,” he says, his expression stern.

“A job for me?” I respond, perplexed, settling into the chair opposite him.

"Tonight, you would join the water witches I am sending to Lord Easterlin’s estate."

"Why? If I may ask," I inquire, my confusion deepening.

"I want you to keep an eye on him while you're there."

"You want me to spy on him for you?" I question, my bewilderment escalating.

"I think that's obvious," he retorts, his tone sharp.

"Can I ask something?"

"What?" he sounds irritated before I even ask my question.

“Do I have a say if I want to do this?” I press on despite his irritation. He doesn't respond, giving me a pointed look that answers my question.

"When do I leave?"

"Once the water witches are ready to leave."

"Wonderful," I reply with a tight-lipped smile, but the expression fades quickly as Nickolas leans forward. I instinctively edge back in my chair, curious about what's unfolding.

"Ember is supposed to be away the whole time you're in the estate. But if she returns before then, stay clear of her. Do you understand?" I nod. "Good, you can leave."

I hastily vacate the chair, matching my departure speed with the urgency to exit his office. I can't believe I'm headed to Ember's house. My life couldn't be any more fucked up.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

We arrive at Lord Easterlin's Estate late at night, a small group consisting of Beatrice, a few other witches, and myself. Navigating through the expansive mansion, which rivals the castle in both size and resemblance, we head toward Lord Easterlin's room. Beatrice wishes to check on him before we retire for the night.

The grand master bedroom welcomes us with moonlight streaming through large windows, casting a gentle glow across the room. A king-sized bed, adorned with crisp, white linens and an array of plump pillows, commands the center. Lord Easterlin lays in the bed, looking no different from a sick human. Wow! Beatrice told me he was ill, but I didn't believe her. I can't believe it's true. It explains the heavy smell of herbs in the room.

"Good evening, your grace," Beatrice greets Lord Easterlin, bowing her head slightly.

"Beatrice, I can't believe His Majesty sent you," Lord Easterlin responds, sitting up in bed. "He didn't need to; I already have enough water witches treating my illness."

"Indeed, your grace, the king wanted to ensure you receive the best care possible. My abilities may bring a different perspective to your healing process."

"Regardless, he shouldn't have." Lord Easterlin's gaze shifts from Beatrice to me. He takes in every inch of me, his eyes assessing my features with lust filling his eyes. His gaze lingers on my breast, causing me to instinctively wrap my arms around myself. A smirk plays on his lips as he asks, "Who do we have here?"

"This is my assistant, Amelia."

"Amelia? Don't tell me your assistant is the king's mate?"

"Yes," Beatrice confirms.

"But she isn't a witch. How can she be your assistant?" Lord

Easterlin questions, mirroring my own thoughts.

"She isn't my actual assistant, but she's filling in. Even though she doesn't have magic, she can still help run errands."

"Hmm," he responds, nodding. Doubt lingers in his gaze, but he doesn't press further. "Come here," he commands, and a shiver runs down my spine.

Did he just ask me to move closer?

"Aren't her ears working?" he questions Beatrice.

"They are," she replies, giving me a subtle look.

Swallowing hard, I move toward him, stopping a few feet from the bed. In an instant, he grabs my hand and pulls me closer. My eyes widen in terror, my heart racing at the thought of him doing something inappropriate. I notice Beatrice moving from the corner of my eyes, but she halts as he refrains from any further action, choosing instead to simply stare. His scent fills my nose, and I hold back the urge to puke. He smells awful.

Lord Easterlin moves his hand behind my head, forcedly bending it, and pulls my hair from the scrunchie holding it. My blonde locks cascade down my back in waves. He pulls a strand to his nose, sniffing it. "You will definitely be a nice fuck," he declares, closing his eyes. Shocked, I take a step back, my hair escaping his grasp.

"Lord Easterlin, Amelia is the king's mate," Beatrice says, her tone laced with a hint of annoyance.

"You look like you will be a fighter too. My favorite." He grins, revealing his teeth. My skin crawls with disgust, and I try to drive away the thought of punching him for thinking he could have me.

"She belongs only to the king, Lord Easterlin," Beatrice asserts, her voice louder this time. She strides over and grabs my hand, her grip tight as she subtly glares at Lord Easterlin. I look at her, shocked by her reaction to his disgusting behavior. I had expected the opposite from her.

"Too bad. I would have made her experience things she could never imagine in her life," he remarks, reclining on his pillow.

"I believe you don't require our services tonight. We will take our leave. Goodnight, your grace," Beatrice declares, pulling me out of the room.

I thank her for what she did, but she acts like she didn’t hear. That’s not surprising. I can't help but wonder what Nickolas would do if he found out what happened tonight. Probably nothing. My heart clenches at the thought.

“He is lucky I know his value to the kingdom,” Beatrice says, pulling me from my thoughts.

“What do you mean?”

“One word and his head would’ve been gone by morning,” she says, and I freeze.

Did I voice out my thoughts?

I stare at Beatrice in sheer surprise. My lips part, ready to seek more explanation, but she strides away before I can utter a single word, leaving me alone with my thought, wondering if she really meant what she said.

•••

The following morning, I wake up late, to my utmost surprise. Beatrice and the other witches have already gone to Lord Easterlin's room to treat him. I have a feeling Beatrice intentionally allowed me to sleep in so I wouldn't have to come along. For a lady who seems to act like she doesn't care, she sure has a nice way of showing it.

I quickly freshen up and head to the kitchen to find something to eat. Arriving, I discover the food Beatrice left for me has magically ended up in the bin, and the only thing left in the fridge are bags of blood. Staring at the blood, my tongue grazes the top of my teeth, and a flood of memories from my childhood comes rushing back, but I push them away. Now isn’t the time to go down that road. It’s all in the past. Unable to find anything to eat, I decide to wander around the estate, and during my exploration, I stumble upon a library. Eager to occupy my time while waiting for Beatrice to finish treating Lord Easterlin, I step inside, ready to explore the shelves.

To my utmost surprise, I find a mafia romance novel on the shelves. I can’t help but wonder who it belongs to, but I don’t dwell on it for long and begin to read the book. Mafia romance novels are one of my favorite genres, though I can read any romance genre. The name of the book is “A Second Chance.”

I'm turning the page of my book when the voices outside the library halt my action. I’ve been reading for quite a while now, and the sun is close to setting. I recognize their voices immediately, and their conversation piques my interest.

“The king is now fucking his mate; it’s only a matter of time before his attraction toward her changes into feelings, and you decide to spend the night partying. What if one of his men saw you

and reported back to him? Do you think he would still want to marry you if he knew you were fucking half the male population in his kingdom?" Lord Easterlin barks at someone I believe is Ember, as I can smell her scent from here.

If only Lord Easterlin knew he had nothing to worry about. The king wasn't fucking me or likely to develop any feelings for me. I am 100% sure of that.

"The king will never know because the men I fuck won't be stupid enough to tell him, and his men don't frequent the clubs I visit. I also don't think he could ever develop feelings for her. Her father murdered our late king. Falling for her would be betraying his father and our kind. We all know how our king loves both, so we have nothing to worry about."

Ember is right. That's why I also see it never happening between us. I also can't believe Ember is involved with other men even though the king wishes to marry her.

"Regardless, you will stop partying and fucking other men until you are announced the future queen. Do you understand?"

"Yes, father."

"Now go and bathe again so that when you return to the palace, the king won't smell the bastards you fucked last night."

"Okay, Father," Ember says, and I hear footsteps retreating from the library doorway.

I mask my scent as they walk away. I didn't want them to know I was listening in on their conversation, so I unmasked my scent. It's confusing, but my real scent isn't the one they all know. It's my masked scent. Except for my mate, none of them can tell I'm the same person when my scent is masked and unmasked. It's a gift and a curse. Opening my book, I continue to read, hoping to finish this chapter before Ember finds out I am around.

•••

I wake up gasping for air as a bucket of ice-cold water is poured on me. I rush out of the chair I was sitting in, looking around for the person who chose to wake me up in such a cruel way. I didn't even know I was sleeping. Wiping the water out of my eyes, I see Ember standing a few feet away with a bucket in her hand and a scowl on her face. That's not surprising.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" she barks at me, snatching the book from my hand, now soiled with the water she poured on

me. I want to reply and say I'm reading, but I think that’s already obvious.

“I asked you a damn question!” she yells, smacking the book against my head. My head whips up, my wet hair slapping my face as I glare at her, anger bubbling beneath the surface.

"Are you fucking glaring at me right now?" Ember's voice slices through the air like a whip as she raises the book menacingly, poised to strike. I instinctively close my eyes, bracing myself for the impending impact, but it never comes.

Peeking through my lashes, I'm surprised to see someone has intervened, grasping Ember's hand. My gaze shifts to Eric, confusion furrowing my brow as I wonder what he's doing here.

"Eric?" I utter, my voice tinged with disbelief at his sudden appearance.

"So, this is why you kept me waiting for an hour?" Eric's voice carries a tinge of annoyance as he addresses Ember, releasing her hand with a dismissive gesture.

Ember rolls her eyes and folds her arms tightly across her chest, adopting an air of nonchalance as she stares down at her meticulously polished nails. "No, we were looking for her, rather," she replies with a hint of sarcasm, her tone dripping with insincerity.

"Really, and you just happened to have a bucket with you when you found her?" Eric's skepticism is palpable, his disbelief evident in the furrow of his brow. I remain bewildered, struggling to make sense of the situation unfolding before me.

"Yeah, and now that you have her, you can be on your way," Ember declares dismissively, pivoting on her heel and striding out of the room.

Eric's concerned gaze settles on me, his hand reaching out to grasp my arm as he scans me for any signs of harm.

"Are you okay?" he inquires, his voice laced with genuine concern.

"Yeah, she only poured water on me," I reply, feeling slightly awkward under his scrutiny.

"Thanks, heavens." Eric exhales, a visible sense of relief washing over him. Without hesitation, he removes his suit jacket and drapes it over my shoulders.

"Thank you," I mutter, offering Eric a grateful glance as we begin to walk toward the door. His kindness toward me prompts a fleeting

thought of what it would be like if he were the one Marie had recognized as our mate that night instead of Nickolas. Perhaps things would have been different, maybe happier. I release a sigh, pushing the thought aside.

"Let's go," Eric says, his hand finding mine as he leads me toward the door.

"Where are we going?" I inquire, a note of curiosity in my voice.

"To the castle. The king wants you back tonight," he replies, his tone carrying a sense of urgency.

"Oh, and what about Beatrice and the others?"

"They will return tomorrow."

"Alright, and thank you," I say as Eric opens the back door of the Rolls-Royce for me before getting in beside me. The engine roars to life as we settle into our seats.

“I would assume your day was hell,” he says, running his eyes over my dress that was slowly drying thanks to the warmth from the car's heating.

“Take a guess,” I say, giving him a fake smile.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what did you do to incur her wrath this time?”

I love how he says "this time" because, with Ember, it’s always going to be something. “I think it’s because I read one of her novels.”

“Really?” He lifts a brow in surprise. I nod.

“I shouldn’t be surprised. The woman throws a tantrum if she can’t find her phone, even when it’s right in front of her.”

“I take it you don’t like her very much,” I say, recalling the first time he saved me from her and today when interaction between them.

“Anyone who didn’t, I fear, must be mad.”

I chuckle at his statement, finding it true. Ember is a piece of work. I pity her mate. Speaking of mates, I wonder if Eric has found his. It’s at the tip of my tongue to ask, but I don’t know if I should. He has been nice to me since I arrived, but it doesn’t mean we are friends.

“What's the name?” Eric says, pulling me away from my thoughts.

“What?” I ask, blinking my eyes as I return back to earth.

“The name of the book she sent you to the dungeons for.”

“Oh, uhm… A Second Chance by Amal A. Usman.”

“Okay.” After that, he doesn’t say anything and maintains silence the whole ride back to the castle. I wonder why he asked, but don’t voice it out. As I said, him being nice to me doesn’t mean we are friends.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

We arrive when the sun has fully set, and the stars begin to emerge, decorating the night sky. I walk straight to the maid's quarters to change my clothes. Stepping out of my room once I'm done, I head to the kitchen in search of something to eat. I haven't eaten all day, so I'm starving.

"Hello," I greet the head chef. With Beatrice still at Lord Easterlin's estate, I wonder if I would be given any food tonight.

"Your dinner is with the king," he responds stoically.

"What?" I say, shocked, wondering if I heard correctly.

"Your food is—"

"I heard you the first time," I cut off the chef. "Why is my food with the king?"

"Because he asked for it to be with him," he replies flatly.

"Hmm…" I stand in the kitchen, wondering why Nickolas has my dinner.

"I advise you to hurry before the king decides to throw your food in the bin," the chef says, pulling me from my thoughts as my stomach growls at the mention of food.

I decide to stop thinking about the why and walk over to his room, where I presume he is. The whole way over, I continue to wonder why he asked for my food to be delivered to him and why he wants me to eat in front of him. It couldn't be because he feared I won't eat, as that's not happening, so why? I step into his room with the thoughts still roaming my head.

"Approach," he says as I stand by the door. I walk over to him by his desk.

"Sit," he commands again, no emotion in his words. Pulling the

chair in front of his desk, I take my seat.

“Eat.” If I didn’t know better, I would say he is treating me like a dog, which I actually think he is.

“You know I'm a human being, right?” I say and immediately regret it, watching him lift his brow at me. I quickly pick up the fork, diving into my food, praying he doesn’t say anything about it and allows me to eat in peace.

Once I am done eating, he asks me if I have any information of importance to him. I share the conversation Ember had with her dad. For some odd reason, I want Nickolas to have a reason why he shouldn’t marry her. Nickolas isn’t surprised to find out his girlfriend sleeps with other men. I think he knew before I told him today.

“It seems it was a waste sending you over to his house,” Nickolas says, reclining back in his seat.

“Probably because I didn’t stay long enough to gain information of importance.”

“Yeah, which unfortunately couldn’t be helped with that bitch back in town,” Nickolas says, and my eyes widen at his statement, but then my brows furrow as I realize something. Did he bring me back to the castle because Ember returned home? Does Nickolas care? I stare at him, and he lifts a brow at me, causing me to quickly look away. Impossible.

“When you are done having conversations in your head, hop in the bed.”

I nod, too surprised to speak by my sudden discovery that I find pretty hard to believe. I hop into his bed naked as usual. Feeling a little tired today, I dozed off quickly, and with his scent everywhere around me, it couldn’t go any other way.

•••

The following morning, on my way to the kitchen for breakfast, I halt in my tracks as nausea hits me, scenting the aroma of the food made. I cover my mouth and nose immediately and take a step back. It doesn't help as someone passes in front of me with a plate filled with eggs and baked beans. I gag, pressing my palm over my mouth, but it's too late—I end up spilling my entire dinner by the kitchen entrance.

“Eww,” someone says.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” another barks.

“I'm so sorry.” I apologize, wiping the side of my mouth with the back of my hand. I can’t imagine how disgusted they must be right now. I didn’t mean to throw up here. I glance around the room, and everyone looks at me with either a scowl or anger in their eyes. I quickly turn around and walk away from the kitchen. I doubt I'll be eating breakfast today.

The rest of my morning is spent throwing up and feeling weak. Beatrice comes to see me after my fifth visit to the bathroom. She gives me something to drink to help with it. I doze off soon after drinking it and wake up later at night.

I spent the rest of the week vomiting in the morning and sleeping through the day. I can’t help but wonder if Nickolas poisoned me the day I ate in his room, but why would he though?

NICKOLAS

I discreetly check the time on my Rolex as Lord Goleman continues to regale us with the tale of his harrowing encounter with a werewolf—a narrative I've heard at least a hundred times before. His memory seems to be the size of a peanut, and it's a challenge not to roll my eyes as he recounts the exact details with unwavering enthusiasm. It's become a predictable ritual at every party I host. Tonight is The Bloodmoon Gala.

I could easily point out that he has shared this story on numerous occasions, but experience has taught me that such a revelation would be forgotten by the next gathering. The other lords' sons standing beside me share a knowing glance, silently acknowledging the repetitive nature of Lord Goleman's storytelling. None of us dare interrupt him, preferring to endure the familiar narrative rather than risk his ire. I suppress a sigh, resigned to the fact that, once again, we'll be subjected to the saga of the werewolf attack.

I scan the room for Eric or Beatrice, wondering why they haven’t come to look for me yet. If either of them doesn't come running soon, I will have to declare one of the worst vampires on earth the future queen. Just thinking about it causes an unsettling feeling in my stomach. To drive away the unease, I down the rest of my wine in one go and decide to move away from the crowd in search of either of them. Just as I'm about to excuse myself from the group, Eric finally decides to grace himself with our presence. He rushes over to me, worry lining his features. Perfect timing; I knew I could count on him.

"She's bleeding," he whispers in my ear. I face him, feigning shock as if I don't know what he is talking about.

"Is something wrong, Your Majesty?" Lord Goleman asks, noticing my shift in emotions. Good, tonight couldn't go more perfectly.

"It appears so, Lord Goleman," I turn to face Eric, and he shakes his head, pity in his eyes for me.

"What is wrong, Your Majesty?" Lord Goleman asks, concerned. I don't say anything and just stare at Eric.

"Eric, what did you whisper in His Majesty's ear?"

"It's not in my place to say," Eric replies. I run my palm across my face and release a deep sign.

"Your Majesty, you are scaring me. Please burden me with your troubles so I can fix it."

"Take me to her," I inform Eric, ignoring Lord Goleman's request.

"This way, Your Majesty." Eric moves, but Lord Goleman stops us. Eric turns to face me, and I nod, telling him he can share the fake bad news.

"We just found out Amelia was pregnant."

"Amelia? The werewolf princess? She's pregnant?" Lord Goleman exclaims, and the whole room goes quiet. Just the reaction I wanted. I resist the urge to turn and look at Lord Easterlin's face.

"I said was, Lord Goleman. The princess had a miscarriage."

If it's possible, the whole room becomes even quieter. Lord Goleman stares at Eric, wide-eyed and speechless. He turns to face me, but only for a second before quickly bowing his head.

Eric continues to walk out, and I follow him. I leave the room and let the gossip begin. With the news Eric just shared, nobody will be asking me to announce Ember as the future queen. They will all be too scared to approach me, fearing I might kill them from the grief of losing my first child. The plan might have been elaborate, but it was perfect nonetheless.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

AMELIA

The engine roars to life as Nickolas's Range Rover glides out of the castle gates, leaving the isolated mountain abode behind. I gaze out of the backseat window, watching the castle shrink in the distance. Our destination: Vampire City, as we referred to it, back home.

Nestled in the city below, it's the home for most vampires, and today, I find myself accompanying Nickolas on his annual visit to the town. The shock from this morning still lingers after Beatrice dropped the unexpected news. However, it presents an incredible opportunity for escape. I know Nickolas may have taken measures to prevent me from getting away, but I doubt I won't be able to slip away while we explore the city.

The burning question of why he insisted on my company also looms, but I refrain from asking. Past encounters have shown that any inquiry would only be met with his intimidating glare. But the curiosity within me also longs to confront him about why he chose to spread the lie throughout the entire kingdom that I had a miscarriage two weeks ago when, in fact, I was still a virgin. I figured that’s why he pretended we were sleeping together, and I would have never guessed it.

I'm still attempting to piece together how I bled, even though I wasn't on my period, and even if I were, the amount of blood on my bed that day was too excessive to be menstrual. My suspicion points to the involvement of a witch. At least I now understand why I experienced vomiting and slept like a pregnant woman over the past week. My intuition was correct in assuming that he had poisoned me because, indeed, he did. The poison induced vomiting

and weakened my wolf, compelling me to sleep through the day. It's evident that Nickolas went to great lengths to fabricate my miscarriage, but the motive behind his actions eludes me. I find myself itching to ask him as he casually types on his phone, seemingly oblivious to my presence beside him.

I observe his attire, noting his usual professional dress, accentuated today by the well-fitted suit jacket. When he turns to face me, I quickly avert my gaze. I sense his green eyes piercing into the side of my face, but I resist the urge to meet his gaze. Throughout the car ride, I've been attempting to soothe Marie, as our close proximity seems to be affecting her—and perhaps me, too, to some extent. His scent permeates the air, and I can feel his body heat in the limited space between us. My knees instinctively draw together as I imagine the sensation of that warmth against my bare skin when... I halt my thoughts abruptly as I suddenly sense him moving closer, bridging the gap between us. Startled, I meet his gaze as he opens the door and instructs me to exit. Lost in my thoughts, I hadn't realized we had arrived.

Stepping out of the car, I notice we're at a hotel. Nickolas doesn't wait for me, confidently striding toward the entrance, exuding dominance and power with every step. I quickly follow suit, running to catch up with him.

Entering the hotel, I find Nickolas already heading for the elevator. I rush to join him, stepping in before the doors close, and we begin our ascent. Throughout the elevator ride, Nickolas seems oblivious to my presence, engrossed in a phone call with Eric.

The elevator dings, and we exit together. His arm brushes against mine, sending a jolt through me, courtesy of the mate bond. At times like this, I resent the mate bond. We walk to the last room on the floor, and he effortlessly opens it with a keypad I didn't know he possessed.

Stepping into the room, I'm captivated by its elegance. Despite my father owning a chain of hotels, the allure of a well-designed suite still impresses me. Nickolas opens the first door to the right, disappearing inside. My eyes roam across the tasteful furnishings—the nude couch adorned with blue throw pillows; the coffee table holding a solitary phone. Contemplating whether to call my family, I shake my head, choosing not to risk Nickolas discovering their whereabouts.

Minutes pass, and Nickolas is still absent. Our bags arrive, but he

doesn't return to provide instructions on my room. Deciding to tempt fate a bit, I switch on the TV to pass the time while waiting for Nickolas. A whimsical idea strikes me, and I grab the phone, indulging in a bit of luxury by ordering food and wine.

"Sometimes I believe you have a death wish," Marie remarks, eyeing me skeptically as I take a sip of the wine.

"I know," I reply, a sly smile playing on my lips as I savor a bite of cheese. "I highly doubt he would go to the extremes over some food and wine, and even if he does, at least I had a decent last meal."

"True," Marie chuckles, clearly entertained by my audacity.

"Allowing me to enjoy good food and wine right now is the least he could do after the hell he put me through this past week," I add, my tone a mixture of defiance and amusement.

"Also true," Marie agrees.

Finishing my food, I doze off watching a Korean drama, only to wake up when I hear the door open.

"Your Majesty," I utter, sitting up on the couch and hastily wiping my mouth for any signs of drool. However, Nickolas pays me no heed, proceeding to where our bags were and dragging them into the room. Just before he disappears entirely, he utters something.

"You can enter now," he declares, slamming the door behind him.

Slowly, I approach the door and cautiously step into the room. Nickolas is engrossed in sorting through his bags and pulling out clothes before heading to the bathroom. My eyes wander, taking in the expansive bed adorned with crisp white sheets and covers.

Turning to my left, I'm met with a breathtaking sight—the cityscape illuminated with countless lights and towering skyscrapers. A gasp escapes me as I walk over to the bed, unable to tear my eyes away from the mesmerizing view. It seems that accompanying Nickolas isn't turning out as bad as I initially thought. Despite my reservations about joining him, the stunning view and the indulgence in good food and wine have pleasantly surprised me. I'm confident the food wasn't poisoned, considering no one would dare harm Nickolas.

My thoughts are interrupted as Nickolas steps out of the bathroom dressed in pajama bottoms and a vest. Considering it's not cold, why is he opting for a vest? If anything, the temperature suggests he should be shirtless.

Deciding to focus on my own matters, I mind my business and

head to the bathroom to shower, equipped with the most decent nightgown that Beatrice managed to pack in my suitcase. I step out of the bathroom once I'm done with my hair still wet.

“Dry your fucking hair before you come to bed,” he commands from the bed. Seated against the headboard, one arm casually behind his head. I wondered if we would be sharing the bed, and it seems I just got my answer.

I towel-dry my hair as much as possible and join him in bed. I rest my back against the headboard, pulling the covers over my legs. Nervousness twists in my belly; it's the first time we're sharing a bed. I'm well aware that nothing is likely to happen, but the proximity sparks a tingling sensation. Close yet far, I can't shake the uncertainty.

Nickolas turns off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. The sound of covers rustling makes me tense, unsure of what might happen, even though the chances are slim to none.

A yelp escapes me as I feel my ankle grabbed, and my body is forced to lie down on the bed. I realize I might have been wrong about nothing happening. My heart pounds as I wonder what he's about to do. While I don't think he'll force himself on me, I remain clueless about his intentions.

Swallowing hard, I feel him hovering above me, and I attempt to speak, "Your Majes—" but my words are cut off as I sense his warm hands pushing my short nightgown up and over my head.

“Why are you taking off my clothes?” I ask, reaching for my nightgown, but it’s gone, leaving me in only my panties without a bra. The lack of light in the room conceals my body from Nickolas. It even baffles me how he seems to know where to touch me. I’m still not worried he would sleep with me, thanks to the comment he made last time I was naked in front of him, but it doesn’t mean I am okay with him seeing me naked, either. I also don’t understand what he is doing. Why does he need me naked?

Switching my eyes to my werewolf vision, I'm blessed with the breathtaking sights of his biceps filled with veins as one of his hands rests against the headboard. I lick my lips, fixating on the enticing view, and a sudden heat envelops me, prompting me to fan myself with my palm to cool down.

Nickolas moves to close the gap between us, but I stop him. "What are you doing?" I ask, placing my hand on his chest as he moves toward me. I pause, relishing the sensation of it under my

skin. I exhale as a shiver runs down my spine. Oh, heaven!

I've completely forgotten the initial reason for placing my hand there in the first place. Lost in the moment, I continue to relish the feeling under my fingertips, gliding my hand down to his abs. However, I halt when I feel a rumble against my palm.

"Amelia," he says, a low throat growl vibrating through him. "I am no werewolf, but I can fucking smell your lust. Keep your hormones in check."

Embarrassment reddens my cheeks. I hate the mate bond. "I'm not hot for you," I lie through my teeth, quickly withdrawing my hand from his chest.

"If that's what you like to tell yourself, that's your fucking business," he retorts, moving away from above me. I turn to face him, but he quickly turns my head back.

"Face there," he commands, pointing in the opposite direction to him.

"Okay," I comply and wait, my heart racing in anticipation. I inhale sharply as I feel those calloused hands on my waist, drawing me closer to him. My bare back makes contact with Nickolas's solid front, and I find myself melting against him as his intoxicating scent envelops my senses. The desire to turn around and face him surges within me, but a low growl freezes me in my position, causing goosebumps to spread across my skin. I instinctively pull my knees together and redirect my gaze to the ceiling, a mix of anticipation and hesitation in the charged air.

"By now, you should know we still need to keep up the charade of us fucking. Just because you had a miscarriage doesn't mean we would stop. This is the only way you can have my scent on you by tomorrow, so stay still while it clings to your skin," he explains, his words heating my skin as his breath fans my neck.

"Okay," I say breathlessly.

The desire to tell him that his scent will vanish after my bath tomorrow lingers on the tip of my tongue, yet I hold back. A conflicting part of me yearns to be in his arms at this moment, and I let that desire silence my words.

As the minutes pass, my skin seems to scorch with an intensity that challenges my restraint. It takes every ounce of willpower not to succumb to the urge to turn around and gaze at him with eyes filled with longing. Gradually, I find it increasingly difficult to keep my eyes open. I don't resist as my eyelids surrender to the embrace

of sleep, the scents and sensations of the moment lingering as I drift into slumber.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

I wake up in the middle of the night to someone moaning in pain. Pulling away from Nickolas and turning, I find him dripping with sweat, a deep frown etched on his face. His fists are clenched, and he continues to groan as if in agonizing pain. Could it be a nightmare?

"I will kill you. I will fucking kill you," Nickolas shouts in his sleep, his voice laced with anger and desperation. Startled by the sudden outburst, I jump, my heart pounding in my chest. But as he continues to thrash and yell, a wave of concern washes over me, overpowering any fear I may feel.

Feeling the urgent need to do something, I hesitate for only a moment before gently moving closer to him. Ignoring his request to only call him by his title, I reach out and tap his shoulder, calling his name softly. In this moment of distress, I believe it's necessity and it might help bring him back from whatever nightmare is plaguing his dreams. He doesn't answer and continues to curse and scream in pain. My heart aches to witness my mate like this, so I try harder to wake him up. I straddle his waist and begin to shake his shoulders, screaming at him to wake up. It works, but what I didn't anticipate was having to beg Nickolas not to kill me. His eyes shoot open, and he quickly flips us over, his hand around my neck, choking me.

“Nickolas, it’s me,” I say, my neck burning as he presses me into the bed. My words don't seem to register.

“It’s me, Amelia, your mate,” I plead, staring into his still-hooded eyes. He's not fully awake yet. I struggle hard to free myself from his grip but fail. An idea pops into my head.

“Please don’t kill me.” I kick him in the balls. It does the trick as his eyes clear, and he groans in pain, releasing my neck.

“Fuck, Amelia,” he says, holding his groin, falling to the side.

“I'm sorry.” I quickly rush out of bed, putting some distance between us in case he decides to harm me.

“You could have fucking woken me up any other way,” he grits out.

“Sorry,” I whisper, moving closer to the bed. I pick up my nightgown that Nickolas took off earlier and pull it over my body.

“I need to shower,” Nickolas says, sitting up on the bed.

I hear the bathroom door close. Nickolas is acting strangely. Why did he just do that? I've never seen him shirtless, but I doubt he has anything underneath to be ashamed of, so I don't understand. The man is sexy; I bet my knees would have been trembling at the sight of him shirtless, so it doesn’t make sense. I ponder over it as Nickolas showers and fall asleep thinking about it.

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The following morning I slowly flutter my eyes open, stretching my sore limbs. Glancing to my right, I find Nickolas peacefully asleep, a stark contrast to the tumultuous night before. My gaze lingers on him lying on his back, the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest a calming cadence. He’s wearing a vest again and isn’t shirtless, as I would expect. As I listen to his steady heartbeat, an inexplicable tranquility washes over me. Shifting onto my belly, I relish the opportunity to fully admire his striking face. Despite the fear he instills in me when awake, watching him sleep brings an odd serenity to my heart. My fingers ache to trace the contours of his full brows, to explore the softness I imagine lies beneath. Yielding to the temptation, my hand inches toward his face but is abruptly caught before reaching its destination. His emerald eyes shoot open, darkening the second they land on me. I bit my bottom lip, fearing I might have ruined my day before it even started.

"Don't ever fucking try to lay your hands on me again. I will chop it off if you dare," he utters, flinging my hand aside. A painful grip tightens around my heart. Though not unfamiliar, his words pierce through me, leaving a lingering ache. It's not the first instance of such threats, yet the repetition fails to dull the hurt. He, of all people, should crave my touch, yet here he is, threatening amputation. It's a sorrowful realization, one that stings deeply.

"Sorry, I won't do it again," I murmur as he rises from the bed. Expecting him to head to the bathroom, I'm caught off guard by his

unexpected move. Nickolas seizes my ankle, pulling me to his side. A yelp escapes me as he lifts me to my feet, his hand now at the back of my neck. I'm bewildered as he buries his nose in the nape of my neck, taking in my scent. My breathing seizes. What on earth is he doing?

"You smell as you fucking should if I fucked your brains last night. Good," he murmurs against my skin, the words sending a rush of heat through me all the way to my center. My knees involuntarily clench together.

He pulls away from my neck and stares into my eyes. I swallow hard as his hand continues to rest on my neck. My eyes gaze into those beautiful emerald eyes of his, and I find myself lost staring at them. They are so beautiful but filled with much sorrow, pain, and sadness. How can I tell? I don't, maybe because we are mates, but I can see it behind the void look he is giving me right now. And not just that, I feel a strong tug in my heart to erase all those pain and suffering. He doesn't deserve it, but my heart can't bear not to want to help.

He withdraws his hand and heads to the bathroom, leaving me pondering whether to follow the pull in my heart to unveil the mysteries behind his stern look and emotionless eyes.

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Nickolas and I step outside the hotel an hour or two later, greeted by the sleek Mercedes parked at the front. We finished getting ready a few minutes ago. As Nickolas hoped, his scent still lingers on my skin even after showering. I approach the waiting car, ready to step in, when a sudden glint of reflected light from someone's shades catches my eye, momentarily blinding me. Squinting against the glare, I attempt to identify the person, but in the blink of an eye, they vanish as if they were never present. Weird! Deciding not to dwell on it, I step into the car to be on our way.

As always, I sit quietly in the back while Nickolas ignores me, engrossed in his phone. After a few minutes of driving, the car comes to a halt at a golf resort. Upon entering the lobby, my eyes catch sight of Eric patiently waiting for us. A surge of genuine happiness courses through me, and without hesitation, I hurriedly make my way toward him. He is the only person in this whole kingdom who likes me. You can't imagine how thrilled I am to see

him.

"Hello, Eric," I greet, a genuine smile gracing my lips.

"Hello, Amelia," he responds, mirroring the warmth, and extends his arm toward me. Nickolas strides ahead toward the golf course, leaving us.

“Can I know why we are here?” I inquire, taking Eric's offered arm as we follow Nickolas.

“Nickolas has a business meeting with a human living in the city.”

“Oh,” I acknowledge, recognizing that while it might be vampire territory, it's merely another city for humans. Curiosity nudges at me, prompting further inquiry.

“Do you mind telling me what business?” I question, my interest piqued.

“He is trying to build another hospital in town to make it easier for us to access blood, but the man he is meeting today is holding up the deal. Nickolas plans to talk him into changing his mind while they play golf.”

“Oh, alright.” I nod in understanding.

We walk around the golf course discussing other matters—most things of interest to both of us. I actually like spending time with Eric; he makes me forget that Nickolas wishes to kill my family and that I will die at his hands one day. As we strolled, I felt someone following us, but I found no one every time I turned around. I blame it on the stares I'm getting from having Nickolas's scent on me and don’t bother to check anymore, even if I feel someone’s gaze drilling holes in my back.

As Eric and I finally reach the spot where Nickolas and the human named Josh engage in their business meeting, I've tactfully surveyed the entire golf course, strategically selecting the optimal escape route. I prepare to voice my request to Eric, parting my lips to inquire if he can persuade Nickolas to allow me to retreat back to the hotel when something else slips off my lips. Blood.

"Amelia!" Eric's anguished scream echoes in my ears, amidst the chaos of gunfire and agony.

Blood spills from my mouth, a metallic tang staining my lips as I struggle to comprehend the onslaught of pain ripping through me. Instinctively, my hand moves to the chest area, opposite of where I suspect the silver bullet must have impaled me from behind. Shock and disbelief mingle in my wide-eyed gaze, the realization of my

life slipping away crashing over me like a tidal wave.

A barrage of bullets shreds through my flesh like paper. Each impact sends shockwaves of agony coursing through my body, breaking bone and tearing skin with merciless precision. I grit my teeth against the searing pain, but it's overwhelming, consuming me whole.

With each passing second, my strength ebbs away, leaving me powerless against the onslaught. My knees buckle beneath me, unable to bear the weight of my crumbling form any longer.

"What the fuck is happening?" Nickolas demands, rushing to my side and catching me before I hit the ground.

"I don't know. She was fine one second; the next, she’s getting shot at," Eric replies as I continue to cough up blood.

"Get fucking help now!" Nickolas barks, and Eric dashes off, likely to summon assistance. Nickolas also orders the guard to head to where the bullets were fired from.

I gaze at him, expecting to see worry etched across his face. Instead, I'm met with an expression of anger, pure and unbridled. There's no concern for my well-being or fear of losing me—just anger.

My stabbed heart bleeds more than the physical wounds. It dawns on me; he's not devastated at the prospect of losing his mate; he's furious. Angry his only card against my family is gone with my impending demise. He isn't mourning; he's seething, and the realization cuts more profound than any physical pain. Tears well in the corners of my eyes. The hurt I feel now surpasses anything I've ever experienced, a potent blend of physical agony and emotional betrayal.

My vision blurs and a heaviness descends upon my eyes as more blood seeps from my wounds. Nickolas urgently taps my cheeks, his voice commanding me to stay conscious. Despite it, the world turns hazy, and weakness consumes me. My eyelids betray my will, closing against his desperate commands.

"Amelia, fucking stay with me!" Nickolas's urgent cry pierces through the haze of pain, jolting me awake for a moment. I struggle to keep my eyes open, but the darkness threatens to swallow me once more.

He quickly spins me around, his breath hitching at the sight of my battered back. I can't even begin to imagine how gruesome it must look after the hail of bullets it endured.

"I need to take them out."

"No, don't. It will hurt," I cry out, the pain overwhelming me.

"I know that, but if I don't, you will die in a matter of minutes, Amelia. These bullets are made of fucking silver," he explains, his tone filled with urgency and concern.

I take a deep, shuddering breath, considering his words carefully. The gravity of the situation sinks in, and I know he's right. Reluctantly, I nod, steeling myself for the inevitable agony that awaits.

"I'll be quick," Nickolas assures me, his voice determined. With a surge of adrenaline, I brace myself as he swiftly sets to work, ripping each bullet from my flesh with ruthless efficiency. The pain is excruciating, tearing through me with every extraction, but I bite back the screams that threaten to escape.

"I couldn't lose you too," he murmurs, his words heavy with emotion as he finishes his task and spins me back around. Did he really say that? The thought lingers in my mind, but I'm too overwhelmed by pain and exhaustion to dwell on it for long.

Suddenly, my eyes droop shut once more, and this time, I fear they may not open again. But just when I think I'm slipping away, my eyes shoot open once more, greeted by the metallic taste of blood flooding my mouth.

Nickolas has slit his wrist open, offering me his blood in a desperate attempt to save me. Despite my weakened state, I push his outstretched hand away.

"Fucking drink, unless you want to die. Removing the bullets is only one part; you need to heal quickly too." Nickolas insists, his voice laced with resolve as he forcefully offers his wrist once more. His gaze is intense, compelling me to yield despite my reluctance. I attempt to unmask my scent, preparing to release my fangs after, but one word from Nickolas halts me in my tracks.

"Don't! You still can't unmask. Just drink it; it should still help," he instructs, pushing his wrist closer to my mouth. Without hesitation, I press my lips to his skin, drinking deeply not just for the healing it offers, but for the sheer pleasure of it. Each swallow brings a surge of vitality coursing through my veins and revitalizing my battered body. And as I drink, I can't help but wonder at the depth of Nickolas's sacrifice, and the inexplicable bond that seems to bind us together with me drinking his blood right now.

“Fuck me!” Eric exclaims, returning to the scene and snapping

me back to reality. I push Nickolas's wrist away, scrambling to my feet and hastily wiping my mouth clean. "I knew but…" he continues, looking at me in utter shock of what he witnessed.

I don't wait for Eric to finish his sentence. With tears in my eyes, I bolt from the scene. Regret and fear grip me as I grapple with the consequences of letting my true nature surface. A secret I've guarded my entire life is now laid bare. I can't shake the ominous feeling that this revelation is only the beginning of more troubles to come.

"Where the fuck do you think you are going?" Nickolas blocks my path, causing me to come to a halt.

"Please, I just want to be alone right now. Please," I plead, sniffling as more tears stream down my face. I know it seems like I am trying to run away, but I'm not yet. Right now, I just need some time alone to process what happened.

"Lift your head up," he commands, and I do, revealing my tear-streaked face and bloodshot eyes. He remains silent for a good second before walking past me and back to the golf course.

"Thank you," I whisper as he walks away.

I continue walking and find a lake where I sit by the banks with my knees pulled to my belly. I stare at the water aimlessly, thoughts swirling in my head.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of," Marie says.

"I know, but you know why I don't want to accept that side of me. You know what it means."

"And so what? Being different from others doesn't have to be a bad thing. You being a—"

"Don't say it," I cut her off.

"You being what you are doesn't make you less of a werewolf, and you know this. So stop feeling like an imposter or something."

"I can't help it, Marie. Every single name I've been called suddenly feels deserved right now. Weirdo, freak, and so much more."

"You are not any of those things, and you know it."

"I wish I believed that Marie, but I don't. Thank you for trying to cheer me up."

"Anytime, Amelia," she says and cuts off our connection.

My mind drifts to what my mate might do with me now that he knows I have my mother's gift. He couldn't do the same thing his dad did to my mom, but I won't put it past him to try. Panic starts

to rise in me. I have to make sure Nickolas doesn't try it, but how? Even if I tell him, it's fruitless. Would he believe me? I hardly doubt it.

I quickly stand to my feet, looking around me. I couldn't see Nickolas or any of his guards, but I doubt they were far. Now isn't the time to run away. I have to be smart about it. I dust the sand off my body and move away from the lake, heading back to the golf course when I almost fall, bumping into someone. They catch me before I hit the ground, pulling me back up by grabbing my arm.

"Hello, princess. I've been meaning to meet you," the man says as he wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me close. I didn't see him in front of me; he literally appeared from nowhere.

I quickly put my hand up, pushing his chest to put some distance between us, but he only tightens his arms around me.

"Let go of me! Who the hell are you?" I ask, wiggling out of his grasp, but he still doesn't let go.

"It's the only way I could do this," he puts a towel over my nose, pressing it hard against my face. The smell of wolf's bane hits me, and before I can react, I find my eyelids dropping and darkness surrounding me, wondering what the hell just happened?

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CHAPTER TWENTY

My eyes flutter open, and I find myself in an unfamiliar place. Terror courses through me as I take in my surroundings—cages lining the walls, each holding a variety of creatures: humans, werewolves, lycans, mermaids, and more. The air is heavy with fear and desperation, and I can feel the palpable sense of despair emanating from my fellow captives.

An ache in my arm draws my attention, and I discover my wrists bound tightly to the ceiling. Panic surges through me as I try to piece together how I ended up in this nightmarish predicament. Memories flood back—the encounter with the strange man, the drugged haze that clouded my senses, and then nothingness. He must have brought me here, but for what purpose? The question gnaws at my mind, but in this moment, I can only focus on finding a way to escape.

I consider reaching out to Marie for help, but the memory of the gunshot wound I sustained earlier gives me pause. The silver residue from the bullet likely rendered her unconscious, leaving me to fend for myself. With a grim determination, I begin to pull at the restraints binding me, but the searing pain of the silver burns my skin, making every attempt at escape excruciating.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps echoes through the room, and I freeze, my heart pounding in my chest. Someone is approaching, and I can only hope that whoever it is, they hold the key to my freedom. But as the figure comes into view, dread coils in the pit of my stomach, for I know that my ordeal is far from over.

“You can try all you want, but you will never be able to break free from them,” Ember declares, approaching me with burning hatred in her eyes. The realization hits me; she's behind my kidnapping. No one else in the vampire kingdom would dare to take

such a risk.

“Ember,” I say bitterly.

“Do you like your new home?” she inquires, circling around me. I remain silent.

“You don’t have to answer, as your response wasn’t needed.” Ember continues her mocking circuit.

“Why am I here?” I finally ask, turning to the side to catch her before she walks away.

“Because you stupid bitch refused to die,” Ember snarls in my face.

My brows furrow at her words. What is she talking about?

“Of course, a dumbass like you won’t know what I’m talking about,” she says, then the realization hits me, and my eyes widen.

“The gunshot,” I say, shocked that Ember was behind it. She was the last person I could’ve guessed responsible.

“Yes, it was stupid of me to think a silver arrow laced with wolfbane would kill you.” Ember stops circling and brings her face close to mine. “This time, things would progress slower but still give the same end result.”

“What do you mean?” I inquire, a sense of dread settling in.

“Adam, would you like to join us?” she calls, and the man from earlier enters the room.

"Why don’t you show our lovely Amelia here what I mean," Ember instructs before walking away, leaving me gripped with fear. Her words hang in the air ominously, and I realize I'm at her mercy, with no upper hand in this situation. Quickly, I weigh my options and decide to leverage the one thing I know for sure—Nickolas's desire for my safety.

"Whatever you have planned, I advise you to change your mind. Nickolas won’t be too happy if something horrible were to happen to me," I assert, struggling with the silver bonds around my wrists, the burning pain intensifying.

Ember halts in her tracks and bursts out laughing loud and hard, a mocking laugh. Meanwhile, I hear a metallic clang a few feet away, and dread floods my veins as I realize what it is—a blade.

"Ember!" I shout, desperation lacing my voice as I try to get her attention so I can plead with her to reconsider her orders to Adam. But she ignores me and panics, claws at my throat as Adam begins sharpening his blades, his intent clear.

Think, Amelia, think. I can't unmask my scent because of Nickolas's spell, but there must be something I can do. And then it hits me: a risky gamble, but one I must take to save myself.

“I know you are doing this because I had a miscarriage, and you are worried about what would happen next time if I don’t. You have nothing to worry about. The king and I have never slept together. I am not a threat to you, Ember,” I quickly rush to say.

“What?” She stops laughing and spins around to face me. Shock is evident on her face from what I just said. The man also halts from sharpening a blade.

“I swear to you I am still a virgin,” I say, my heart beating fast as I pray she believes me.

“You are lying,” Ember growls.

“I swear on my life. The king has never touched me. He has, but not in that way.” Ember doesn’t say anything for a minute, and when she does, my breathing seizes.

“It doesn’t matter, still kill her, Adam,” she tells him before turning back around. Before I can even utter her name again, she’s gone.

“Please, you don’t have to do this. Please,” I plead, losing my resolve, pulling my hands through the restraints, but they don’t become free. “Do you like money?” I begin to ramble, desperate for any way out. “I come from a rich family; I can get you money. Do you like money? Please don’t kill me.”

“I don’t fucking need money.”

“I doubt what she’s paid you could compare to what the vampire king would pay for me. Sell me to him. He is rich. He will pay a lot of money for me, money you couldn’t even imagine,” I continue, not giving up hope.

“And die before I see that money. Not a chance in hell.” Adam moves away from the table, blade in hand. I continue to thrash in fear, struggling to find another way to escape.

“There has to be something we can work out,” I plead desperately, thrashing against the silver bonds that bind me.

"Stay still," Adam commands, his grip firm as he grabs my waist and drags the blade down my chest to my waist, slashing my shirt open and tearing it completely from my body. I gasp as the fabric gives way, leaving me exposed in just my bra. The sting of the blade against my skin sends waves of pain coursing through me, and I clench my fists tightly, trying to endure it.

“You don’t have to do this,” I plead, my voice quivering with fear as I watch him approach the table I hadn't noticed before. The metal surface gleams ominously under the dim lighting, dark liquid oozing from its edges. My heart pounds in my chest as I take in the sight of the weapons laid out upon it.

Blades glint menacingly, whips coil like serpents ready to strike, and a bat rests ominously among them. Each instrument of torture and destruction sends a chill down my spine, a stark reminder of the difficult situation I find myself in. The shadows cast by the dim lighting only add to the sense of foreboding that hangs heavy in the air.

"Now let me hear those lovely screams of yours," he grins maliciously, the sound of the whip cracking against my flesh echoing through the room. I bite down hard on my lip, trying to stifle the screams threatening to escape as pain sears through me with each lash.

The whip strikes again, this time across my back with such force that it feels like it's cutting deep into my bones. Tears blur my vision, stinging the back of my eyes as I struggle to endure the relentless assault. And when the whip finds its way to my face, the sharp sting of the leather against my skin is almost unbearable.

I plead for him to stop, my cries falling on deaf ears as he continues to rain down blows upon me without mercy. In that moment, I realize that I am not going to convince him to show me mercy, no matter how much I beg. With a defiant resolve, I lock eyes with him.

"Remember I begged you when my soul comes back for revenge," I spit out between clenched teeth, the threat hanging heavy in the air. His eyes widen in shock for a fleeting moment, but he quickly shakes off his surprise, his grin widening as he continues his brutal assault.

He shows no mercy, whipping every inch of my flesh until there is no part of me left untouched. I clench my fists until my nails draw blood, the metallic tang of it mingling with the salt of my tears as they streak down my face. I cry out in agony; each scream’s a testament to the torment I endure at his hands. But to him, it's all just part of the sick game he revels in.

"So much better," he grins sadistically, throwing the whip aside as he works on the chains that bind me to the ceiling. The moment I'm free, I collapse to the floor in a heap.

Every fiber of my being screams with pain, my body drained of all energy from the blood loss and the relentless assault I've endured. I grimace, feeling Adam's cruel grip on my hair as he begins to drag me across the cold, unforgiving floor. I try to protest, to utter a plea for mercy, but the pain is too overwhelming, stealing away my voice.

I hyperventilate, each labored breath sending waves of agony coursing through me as my battered skin scrapes against the unyielding surface beneath me. Every movement is torture, and I can feel my strength waning with each passing moment.

Finally, Adam comes to a stop in front of a cell, and with a cruel sneer, he releases his grip on my hair to open the door. I lie there, broken and defeated, unable to muster the strength to resist as he shoves me roughly into the dank, dark confines of the cell. The metal door clangs shut behind me.

“Tomorrow, we continue,” he says before disappearing into the shadows.

The cold, damp cell surrounds me as I lie on the floor, my body battered and bruised. Blood pools around me, staining the ground beneath. The echoes of my screams still linger in the air, haunting me as I stare blankly at the ceiling. I can’t help but blame Nickolas for my situation. I wouldn’t even be a threat to Ember if it weren't for him. Tears stream down my face, mingling with the blood. I think about what my life has become since the day I met my mate. I really wish I would even die right now because I don’t think there is anything left to live for.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

NICKOLAS

I hang from the ceiling, arms spread wide. My wrists cry out as the chains, laced with oak tree venom, burn me down to my bones. I can barely feel my back whipped until there is no skin left. Short breaths escape my mouth as my head hangs low. This is a typical day for me, but today is worse. I don't react today. I don't cry, wince, or yell in pain, and she is angry. My back bears the brunt of it. I used to cry when I was ten, but once I turned twelve today, I told myself I wouldn't give her the glory of seeing me shed tears or whimper in pain anymore. I can't hurt her, as she made sure I was always weak. This is my way.

I force my eyes through the blood dripping from my wrist to see her. Her blonde hair pulled back tightly into a ponytail, her blue eyes ablaze with anger. I smile, the corners of my mouth curving into a dangerous smirk. I've gotten under her skin, and I've gotten her good.

"You stupid bastard!" she screams, slashing the whip across my face. The skin on my cheeks breaks open, blood pouring out. I bet I lost a gallon of blood today. I know the only reason I'm alive is because of who my father is. If my mother's genes were stronger, like the blue-eyed bitch had hoped, I would have been long dead.

"You're still not reacting," she rages, whipping vigorously, fueled by her anger. I throw my head back, laughing, only stopping when a familiar scent reaches me. My jaw clenches as my blood begins to boil with anger. The more his scent grows stronger, the less I acknowledge the bitch before me. A worse devil is coming, and I prepare myself for what is about to come. He also loves to see the pain in my eyes as he takes me, but today, he won't be seeing anything. He will only see the void and darkness I have embraced.

I jerk awake as the nightmare/memory abruptly comes to an end. Throwing the blanket off, I sit up, legs swinging over the side of the bed. I haven't had these nightmares in years until I found my mate. I know it's because she looks like her. This was one of the reasons why Amelia and I were impossible. She was related to that woman. Even if Nathaniel didn't kill Dad, this will always be a reason for us never to be together.

Speaking of Amelia, we haven't found her. A week has gone by, and still no sign of her. The plan was to let her escape and lead us to where her family was hiding. That's why the security around the golf resort wasn't tight, but unfortunately, things aren't playing out that way. The earth witch's tracker on her has gone dead, blocked by another witch. Frustration courses through me.

Drenched in sweat from the night's turmoil, I climb out of bed and head to the bathroom for a shower. The door bursts open, and I turn, raising an eyebrow at the intrusion. Eric stands there, and I roll my eyes before freezing at his words.

"We found her," he announces.

"Where?" I pivot, facing him as he approaches.

"Hunters' territory."

"Hunters' territory?" Shock reverberates through me. Hunters, though dormant, maintain an off-limits zone for supernaturals. It's inconceivable that Amelia would venture there. My mind races, trying to fathom her motives and actions.

"I know, the same look I had when the witch told me, but she's one hundred percent sure Amelia is there."

"Alright, mobilize ten of our best men and get the cars ready. I'll meet you downstairs in five minutes. I need to shower first."

"Sure," he replies, leaving the room. The urgency of the situation cuts through the fog of sleep, and I prepare to face the unknown awaiting us in the forbidden territory of the hunters.

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Arriving at the location the witch provided, confusion tightens its grip on me as soon as I step out of the car. Instead of the expected human scent, my nostrils are assaulted by the unmistakable aroma of vampires. I exchange a perplexed glance with Eric, his acknowledgment of the oddity mirrored in his expression. We approach the mansion cautiously, parked far enough to maintain

the element of surprise.

As we draw closer, a sense of unease creeps into my thoughts. Something feels off. This shouldn't be the place Amelia would run to; the air is thick with the scent of vampires, leaving me with more questions.

"The king is here, run!" A distant shout pierces the air, and the house quickly empties in the distance. The urgency in the voice implies they've recognized me from afar; I'm not surprised, as any vampire could recognize royalty once they were at a good distance.

Ordering some of my men to pursue, I stride into the abandoned house, an overpowering blend of alcohol and human intoxicants assaulting my senses. Seeking Amelia's scent, my instincts lead me to the basement. Eric follows behind, and our remaining men secure the entrance.

My steps freeze in the center of the room as I see the horror within the cages. Bloodied and malnourished bodies spark anger within me. A particular scent registers and my jaw clenches at the thought of the brutality endured by these women. While no saint, I draw the line at the sexual abuse. My hands ache with a burning desire to shred apart those responsible for the unspeakable abuse inflicted upon these women.

A hand on my shoulder pulls me from the overwhelming anger. "Go and find her. I will deal with this," Eric says, his grip reassuring. I exhale deeply, unclenching fists I hadn't realized were tight.

"Okay."

Continuing my journey, I follow Amelia's scent. The stronger it gets, the more it mingles with the stench of blood. A blood trail leads me to an open cage. Inside, a vampire callously drags her by the hair, throwing her to the ground. I freeze for the second time tonight. If not for the fact that I could smell her scent, I wouldn't fucking know she was the same person on the floor with blood pooling around her.

The vampire pales at the sight of me. Swiftly closing the distance with vampire speed, I rip his heart out, flinging it aside. Approaching Amelia, I crouch, gathering her battered form into my arms. My heart clenches, gazing at her. I fucking hated the bitch, but I would never subject her to this amount of abuse. Covered in bruises, burn marks, and wounds, she lies limp. Standing at full height, holding her close, I hope my familiar scent might somehow contribute to keeping her alive. Her hand falls limp, her head

dangling. I might be too late.

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Amelia's chest rises and falls slowly as she lays on my bed, her breathing shallow and fragile. I sit perched in an armchair nearby, a glass of whiskey in my hand. My heart clenches, recalling Beatrice's words earlier tonight.

"I don't need to tell you. You already know she was tortured, and in order for Amelia to survive, her wolf healed them, but that has also put their lives in danger."

"What do you mean?"

"While undergoing her abuse, Amelia's wolf, drugged with silver, struggled to heal her as much as it could to keep her alive. That has caused her wolf to go into a coma, and she is now unable to heal her even with treatment administered. Amelia is practically human now, fighting for her life like a human would. This makes things complicated because a human only has a ten percent chance of surviving what she did."

"Is there anything that can be done to increase her chances?"

"I know you won't like to hear this, but you have to undo the backfiring of the unmasking spell. It's our only hope of her survival." I don't respond. Undoing that spell would make Amelia more difficult to handle.

"I know it's a lot to risk, but we don't have a choice right now. Only that other side of her can save her."

"I've heard, you can leave."

I needed to think right now, and she wasn't helping. I didn't want Amelia to die, but I also didn't want her to be able to leave the castle undetected because that's what would happen once she could unmask her scent. My soldiers won't even know she's the one in the middle of the night. I have already established that putting a tracker on her won't work. Letting her be able to unmask her scent successfully will be dangerous, but then…

Fuck! I pick up the lamp beside the table and smash it into the nearest wall. I couldn't let another hair on her fucking head be touched again, but I also didn't want to lose my only chance at revenge. I hear her whimper, moving in the bed, and I shift my eyes to her. One look at her and I know what to do.

A heavy sigh escapes my lips, fingers running through my hair as I lift the glass to my lips, taking a sip, all while turning toward the

expansive windows. I don’t like what happened to her. I didn’t care for her as much as I should, but I didn’t need to. Anyone who wasn’t a monster couldn’t be happy with what happened to her. Speaking of it, I am still trying to figure out who kidnapped and tortured her. From what I have gathered from the vampires we captured, they ran a sex trafficking ring of female supernaturals and humans. Beatrice says Amelia wasn’t sexually abused, only tortured. I want to believe Amelia was randomly kidnapped. Still, no other girl suffered a quarter of the torture Amelia faced, making me feel there was more to it.

My phone pings, causing me to pull it out to check my messages. The message is from Eric, telling me the women we rescued have all been treated and they will be fine. I couldn’t be more delighted. Eric also found his mate among one of the ladies kept in the basement. I am so happy for him.

Staring at the window, I wonder what would have happened to them if we didn’t save them. Would they have ended up like her? Most certainly. I shut my eyes, clenching my fist as unwanted memories flash in my head. It’s been centuries, but it still feels like it was just yesterday.

My eyes snap open at the sound of someone groaning. Swiveling away from the window, I find Amelia with tightly shut eyes, her face contorted in pain, and her body tossing around on the bed. In an instant, I abandon the chair, rushing toward her.

Leaning over the bed, I softly call out her name, a gentleness in my voice that contradicts my usual demeanor, yet a necessity at this moment. She responds with a groan, gripping the sheets tightly. Beads of sweat start to form on her forehead, a visible sign of the distress she's in. Concern tightens my features as I pull out my phone, intending to call Beatrice for help but halt at Amelia's words.

"Please stop, I'm begging you!" Her desperate plea pierces the air, echoing the turmoil within her subconscious. The nightmare holds her in its grip.

I swiftly tuck my phone back into my pocket and begin to shake Amelia’s shoulders to wake her up.

"Amelia!" I call out.

"Please save me." She grips my arm, probably recognizing my voice.

"Wake up, you aren't there anymore," I insist, hoping my words

will pull her out of her nightmare.

"Please." She tugs forcefully on my arm, unexpectedly pulling me down to her side. Unprepared, I lose my balance, my nose finding the soft crook of her neck. Instantly, her scent overwhelms my senses, a heady intoxication that triggers a low growl from deep within my chest. I find myself involuntarily sniffing at her neck, the allure of her essence consuming me.

The growl doesn't escape Amelia's notice. She reacts swiftly, her hand finding its way to my neck with a firm grip.

“Please save me, mate,” she utters softly, and I freeze against her. I didn’t know how to fucking react. Amelia had never called me her mate, not even once by mistake.

After what feels like an eternity, I decide to disentangle myself from her, but she refuses to release her grip. Her plea resonates once more, the desperation in her voice tugging at something within me. That part of me that would have said fuck it and pulled away regardless caves in, and I find myself doing something else.

I use my feet to take off my shoes and join her in bed. It’s not the first time I am close to Amelia, but for some odd reason, my heart is pounding as I try to get comfortable with her arm still looping around my neck. I move my hand under her and make her be the one lying on me. She lets go of my neck, moving to wrap her hands around my body, cinching even tighter than before.

Her blonde hair gently tickles my chin, and I find myself having the urge to run my fingers through the strands. What the fuck? Suppressing the impulse, I keep my hands at my side, waiting patiently for her to calm down. What’s happening right now doesn’t change things between us. I'm only doing this because I know my scent must be calming her down, and she needs her sleep. Nothing more.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

AMELIA

My brows furrow as I awaken to the intoxicating scent that has become synonymous with my mate. Slowly opening my eyes, I discover my head cradled against a familiar chest—Nickolas's chest. Confusion sets in as I survey my surroundings, realizing I'm in Nickolas's room. Questions flood my mind: How did I end up here? Did Nickolas rescue me? The realization dawns upon me as I notice my wounds have been carefully tended to. He must have, but even if he did, it doesn't explain why we are cuddled up together.

Nickolas stirs in his sleep, his eyes fluttering open.

"You're awake," he exclaims, his eyes lighting up with an intensity that catches me off guard. Confusion clouds my expression as I attempt to shift away from between his legs, but Nickolas gently stops me. His hand moves into my hair, pulling me back to bring my face inches away from his. My brows knit together in bewilderment. What's he doing?

"Beatrice said it would take days before you wake up. I can't believe you did so soon," he reveals, his beautiful green eyes filled with a profound sense of relief. Relief? I raise my brows in response, choosing to keep my thoughts unspoken for the moment.

"Are you hungry?" he inquires, releasing my hair and rising from the bed.

"Yes," I respond. I can't recall the last time I had a proper meal. I'm starving.

"I will ask Beatrice to bring something right away," he declares, reaching for his phone and dialing her number.

"Can I shower?" I inquire once he concludes the call.

"Yes."

"Thank you." I gently climb out of bed, my muscles protesting as I move. My wounds might have been treated, but they are healing slowly, and I'm not surprised. I haven't felt Marie since I woke up. I haven't even felt her for days. Tears sting the back of my eyes, remembering our last encounter. Her breath was shallow, and our connection faded slowly as she did everything to keep us alive. I hastily wipe them away, not wanting to reveal the emotional turmoil within. My whole body aches and my legs feel like they weigh a ton as I move them. My feet barely touch the ground for more than a minute before Nickolas effortlessly lifts me into his arms. Confusion paints my expression as he carries me to the bathroom, gently placing me on the toilet seat. He begins filling the tub with water and herbs. I bet Beatrice must've left for me. He walks back to me and makes me stand.

"Why?" I ask, struggling to stand on my own two feet, every inch of my body aching.

"Hand up," Nickolas directs, and I comply. My eyes widen as he lifts my dress over my head.

"I can do it myself," I protest, grabbing my dress to cover my nakedness. Nickolas has seen me naked, but that was before I was kidnapped. Right now, I don't even want to look at my body.

Nickolas pays no heed to my protest and swiftly removes the dress from my grasp, casting it aside. I don't try to stop him again, an internal conflict brewing within me, torn between the desire to shield myself and the curiosity of wanting to know what he thinks of my body now. Observing him, I expect to see a disdainful gaze, but instead, I am met with the burning embers of rage. His eyes redden with anger, and his clenched fist speaks volumes.

Tears well up, my heart breaking. He must be pissed off; he has to be mated to someone whose body looks like mine. I know the wounds and burn marks will heal with time, but with Marie in a coma, I can't say if they won't leave a scar.

Nickolas tenderly lifts me off the floor, carrying me to the tub, but his departure is swift. Tears escape my eyes as I watch his retreating back, realizing that he can't even bear to look at me.

In the silence that follows, I can't suppress the question that escapes my lips. What did I do to be cursed with such a mate? He is the reason I was kidnapped, and he can't even look at me after what I went through because of him. I blame Nickolas for what happened

to me. I wouldn't have been a threat to Ember if he didn't pretend we were sleeping together. I hate him. All he has done since I met him is cause me one heartbreak or another, and this time, he caused me physical pain. I just wish he could fucking accept my rejection and free me from this torture. Frustration consumes me, and I scream into the bathroom wall, venting my exhaustion. I'm tired—so tired. Angry tears trace down my face, my heart constricting with hatred. "I hate you. I fucking hate you, Nickolas."

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I emerge from Nickolas's closet, adorned in his clothes. As he enters with a food tray, a surge of hatred simmers within me. My body aches, and my wolf might never wake up again, all because of him. A part of me contemplates ending my suffering by killing him, yet the mate bond holds me back. If only he would accept my rejection, I'd be free.

Nickolas places the tray on his study table, taking a seat behind his desk. Seating myself opposite him, I raise the spoon but halt. The last time he offered food, I ended up having symptoms of pregnancy, and it nearly cost me my life. I push the tray away. I am never eating anything he gives me again. I would rather starve.

"Is something wrong with the food?" he calmly asks, an unexpected change from his usual harsh tone.

"I won't know," I retort, unable to hide the anger simmering within.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he inquires, still maintaining an unusual calm.

"I don't feel like eating anymore," I declare, standing up to leave.

"What do you mean you don't feel like eating anymore, and where the fuck are you going?" he demands, jolting from his chair.

"I'd like to go to my room and rest, if that's okay with you," I reply, facing the door, avoiding eye contact.

"Amelia," he says, approaching me as I reach for the door. Turning me to face him, he gazes into my eyes with an unfamiliar concern. Is this truly Nickolas before me?

"Is something wrong?" he asks.

"I think you're asking the wrong question," I retort, ignoring the turmoil in his eyes.

"Excuse me?" he asks, puzzled.

"Can I go?" I inquire again, attempting to keep my anger in

check, knowing any outburst could worsen our already strained situation.

Before he can respond, his phone rings, offering a brief distraction. Seizing the opportunity, I open the door to leave. I don't look back, even though I feel his eyes on me. Walking downstairs to the maid's quarters, I distance myself from him, seeking solace as far away as possible.

Entering the maid's quarters hallway, confusion grips me as people carry my belongings in and out of my room. Desperate for answers, I stop a maid, but she ignores me. Rushing into my room, I find Beatrice by the wardrobe, sorting clothes.

"What's going on, Beatrice?" I question, approaching her.

"Amelia!" She startles, wide-eyed. "What are you doing out of bed?" She guides me to her bed, concern etched across her face.

"I needed to get away from someone," I confess truthfully.

"Who? But that's not even important. I can't believe he let you out of bed. I will have a serious conversation with him once I am done here," she declares. Her unexpected concern warms my heart, knowing Beatrice seldom displays emotions, making her sincerity palpable.

"He didn't, and you still didn't answer my question."

"Sorry about that. You're moving out."

"Moving out...to where?" My eyes widen, processing the sudden news.

"To your new room. Come, let me show you," she insists, linking my arm with hers and lifting me off the bed.

"Is he sending me back to the dungeon?" Fear creeps in. The thought lingers that he may not be aware of my kidnapping and might send me there as punishment for escaping, even though I returned barely alive.

"Oh, heavens! No," Beatrice assures, leading us upstairs.

"Where then?"

"Next door to His Majesty," she reveals as we reach the third floor.

"What?" I stop abruptly.

"Next door—" I cut her off.

"I heard you," I respond, closing my eyes and exhaling. When I desire distance from him, Nickolas decides to fucking move me next door. What sick joke are you playing on me, Nickolas?

"Is something wrong?" Beatrice asks, observing me closely.

“Nothing's wrong,” I say with a forced smile.

“Alright, let’s go in then,” she urges, and we enter the room.

Why is this happening? Living next door to him makes it even harder to ignore his presence.

“What do you think?” Beatrice asks, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I turn to face her, intending to lie and say I like it, but my words get stuck in my throat. My face drains of color as I realize Nickolas has walked into the room from an adjoining door. An adjoined door? I'm left speechless, wondering how things could have taken such an unexpected turn from bad to worse.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"Didn’t you just eat, dear? Why is your stomach growling?” Beatrice inquires as she tucks me under the covers, her fingers grazing over my stomach as it rumbles beneath her palm. She's insisted that I remain in bed for the next twenty-four hours. My muscles ache from the brief excursion downstairs and back up, ensuring I won’t attempt that again soon.

“No, I haven’t,” I reply, and my stomach growls again.

“Why? I thought creamy shrimp pasta is one of your favorites.”

“You remember,” I smile, reminiscing about the numerous times I asked her to make it for me after the first time. She nods.

“It is, but I didn’t want to eat it because His Majesty served me.”

“You're worried he might’ve poisoned you again,” she says, her gaze softening. I nod slowly. There’s no need to hide it from Beatrice; it's not something I wish to keep from Nickolas.

“You don’t have to worry about that, Amelia. If anyone wants you well in time, it’s him,” she assures me.

“You mean alive because that’s all he wants. Me alive so he can make my father give up his life for mine when the time is right.” She doesn’t say anything and sighs.

“I will bring you another plate soon.” She pats my hair before heading toward the door to leave.

Turning away from the world, I pull the covers over my head. Exhaustion looms over me, and I fear I might succumb to sleep before Beatrice returns. Struggling to keep my eyes open, I surrender to the drowsiness. The creaking of my door opening and Eric's familiar scent awaken me.

Pulling the covers back, I find him entering the room with a food

tray in his hands.

"Hello, Amelia," he greets, walking toward me as I sit up to receive the tray. Placing it in front of me, he helps adjust the pillows by the headboard.

“Hi, Eric.” I return the smile he sends my way. Lifting the lid off the plate on the tray, I see that Beatrice has indeed followed through on her promise. I smile and pick up the fork, eager to dig into the creamy pasta.

“How are you feeling?” Eric asks, taking a seat on the bed by my leg.

“Good,” I mumble with a mouth full of pasta.

"Do you mind telling me how you ended up there?" he asks, and I pause from eating. Lifting my eyes to meet his, I see them filled with pity. He must've seen my body.

I force a smile and reply, "No," then resume eating, hoping he'll drop the topic.

"Amelia." He grabs my left hand, causing me to pause again. Tears sting the back of my eyes. I throw my head back, sniffling.

"I don't want to talk about what happened, okay," I say, dropping my eyes to meet his as they fill with more tears, remembering the horror I faced.

"That's fine. I won't force you to talk about it. You should also know I am here for you, Amelia. I might be the enemy's best friend, but I am here for you if you need me," he says, squeezing my hand gently. The tears drop, and my shoulders quiver as memories of the torture I endured hit me like a bulldozer. Marie is in a coma, and my inability to do anything to help her or my situation intensify the pain.

I cover my face with my hands and sob my heart out for the horror I faced and the injustice done to me. A pair of comforting hands wraps around my body, and a warm chest presses against me. I grab Eric’s shirt, staining it with my tears. He doesn’t complain as I soak it and holds me as I cry until I have no tears left and doze off.

NICKOLAS

I ascend the stairs from my office to Amelia’s room, intending to check up on her. I'm still puzzled by her earlier behavior but decide not to dwell on it too much. As I approach her room, I hear the sound of people talking. My brows knit together, wondering what could be exciting for the maids.

“They look so cute together. It’s so sad they aren’t mates,” I hear one of them say.

“They would’ve been perfect for one another. Just look how much he cares for her,” another adds.

What the fuck are they talking about? My steps quicken, and the scene before my eyes isn’t what I expected. Eric is holding Amelia in his arms as she cries, unaware that the door is open. A tug in my heart forms as the maids drop Amelia’s belongings and scatter.

My nose flares up as a burning fire lights up within me. I don't like that the maids entertain the idea that someone else could be perfect for Amelia. She is my mate. Only I should be perfect for her, not my fucking best friend.

Pushing the door open fully, I step inside, the fire within me growing as I watch him stroke her hair, putting her to sleep. I don’t like it. I don’t fucking like it at all, and he needs to stop before I break his hand. I don’t even care that he is my best friend and probably doesn’t see her that way.

“Eric,” I say through gritted teeth as I try to control my anger.

“Nick,” Eric says, turning around to see me, looking a bit surprised but not alarmed. Of course, he isn’t alarmed. His intentions are pure, but I can’t help the part of me that wants to break his hand for touching my mate.

“I was just about to come look for you,” he says, walking up to me.

“Really? Why?”

“We need to talk.”

“Let’s go to my room,” I say, heading for the adjourned door.

After departing Amelia's, we settle by the fireplace upon reaching my place, each of us cradling a glass of bourbon. Eric swiftly drains his drink in a single gulp before breaking the silence with words.

“We have a problem.”

“I can tell,” I say, looking at him as he refills his glass.

“Amelia refused to talk.”

“That’s surprising,” I remark, sipping my drink.

“What I know so far is what my mate has told me.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“My mate tells me the person you killed isn’t the only one who hurt Amelia.”

“What!” I sit up in my chair, shocked.

“I fear they might come for her again,” he says after finishing his

second glass. I close my eyes, running my hand through my hair, sighing.

"What else do we know?" I ask, opening my eyes.

"Unfortunately, we know nothing about this second person. Just that the person is a vampire."

"That could be fucking anyone."

"Yep," he replies, his shoulders dropping.

"Fuck!" I throw the rest of my drink back.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

AMELIA

I grimace, sitting up on the cold concrete floor. I survey the room with my only good eye, as my right eye has been busted shut. Touching it, I wince, both from the pain in my eye and the countless injuries covering my hands. My body is a canvas of bruises and aches beyond words. Moving my hand to my head, my bottom lip trembles as I feel my bald-shaven head. Tears spill from my eyes. I endured torture upon my arrival in the vampire territory, but nothing like this. Ember and Adam have subjected me to unspeakable things.

I run my half-opened good eye over my battered body, and more tears flow down my swollen cheeks. My shoulders tremble as pained wails rip out of me, but I suddenly freeze upon hearing my name softly called.

I whip my head to the side of the wall I heard it from, wondering who it could be. Is Nickolas here to save me? Hope flutters in my heart, praying that he realized I didn't run away but was kidnapped. Even though being rescued might mean moving from one prison to another, I would take being Nickolas's prisoner any day over being in this hellhole.

I quickly crawl to the side of the wall, my muscles protesting the abrupt movements, but I press on, pressing my ear against the wall. My heart beats fast as I wait to hear my name called again.

"Amelia," a lady's voice vibrates through the walls, and my heart drops. It's just another prisoner. I can't believe I thought Nickolas came to save me. Why did I even think he would come and save me instead of my family? Perhaps because he is the only one who knows not to look for me in his kingdom.

I slowly sit down on the cold ground, resting my back against the chilled wall. The realization sinks in—I'm never getting out of here. I'm

going to die here. The lady calls again, interrupting my train of thought.

“Yes,” I reply, my voice hoarse and barely above a whisper. Rubbing my hand against my throat, I remember how much screaming I did for my voice to get this bad.

“I can’t believe it’s really you. I feel so happy to hear your voice but also sad,” the lady rambles. I don't respond, continuing to think about how I'm going to die here.

“I’ve missed you, dear cousin. I thought I would never hear your voice again.”

"Cousin?" My brows furrow. Why would this strange woman refer to me as her cousin?

“Why aren’t you speaking, Amelia? Did they do something to your voice?” She speaks again, and suddenly it clicks—why she knows my name and voice and, most importantly, why she would dare call me her cousin.

“Lily,” I say, turning to face the wall as if hoping I could pass through it and meet her. “I can’t believe it’s you.” I press my palm to it, desperate to be next to her right now. Lily is the daughter of my father’s younger brother. Thankfully, her parents weren't at the party, as Lily's younger sister was sick, and Lily herself was at college in London.

“Me too,” she says, and I hear her sniffling.

“What are you doing here?” I'm overjoyed to hear her voice, but my heart also aches because something terrible must’ve happened for her to be here.

“Adam grabbed me from a club I went partying at. He’s involved in women trafficking,” Lily says, and I nod, finally understanding why there are so many women in the dungeon.

“I'm so sorry," I murmur.

“It’s not your fault. I should’ve been more careful, and I can’t believe you are the vampire’s king’s mate. How the hell did that happen?” she exclaims, her voice tinged with disbelief.

“I wish I knew,” I say, shaking my head. She must’ve heard our conversation and put two and two together.

“Is it true Uncle Nate is dead? Also heard of the ambush during your dad’s birthday.”

“I-I,” I begin but stop. I want to say no, but I don’t even know if that’s true. The injuries my dad sustained were fatal. It’s been a while, and I haven’t heard anything from them. I can’t say he’s dead, but at the same time, I couldn’t say he was alive.

“I don’t know,” I confess, settling for the truth.

“Have faith, cousin. Uncle Nate is the alpha king; it won’t be so easy to kill him,” she reassures me.

“You’re right. He’s…” I trail off, catching the sound of approaching footsteps.

“Shh,” I tell Lily, moving my eyes to my cell door. I wait to see if Adam is back to finish the job.

“Don’t speak no matter what you hear,” I whisper. I don’t want them to know I have someone I care about here.

“Hello princess, miss me?” Ember's voice taunts as she strides into the room, a sinister smile playing on her lips. A surge of hatred churns in my chest as I glare at her. Each day, my resentment for her deepens. I remain silent as she approaches, her heels echoing ominously in the confined space. Today, she's dressed differently—in jeans, a black jacket, and a white T-shirt underneath. I have never actually seen her in jeans before until today. “Answer when I speak to you, bitch,” she sneers, grabbing the collar of my shirt and delivering a stinging slap across my face. My already cut lips bleed afresh, a sharp pain lancing through me.

“No,” I spit out defiantly, glaring at her. My hands itch to retaliate, but I refrain, knowing she has the upper hand here and I don't need anything to make things worse for me.

“I'm not surprised,” Ember scoffs, releasing my collar. She turns around to address someone outside the cell, an individual I hadn't even been aware of until now. “Drag her out,” she orders, her command directed at a bulky man standing behind her.

He approaches me, seizing me by the collar and dragging me across the floor. My wounds, barely healing, begin to bleed again, and I wince as my skin scrapes against the unforgiving surface. He transports me to the center of the underground room, securing me to a chair with ropes he finds lying around. This is the same place where Adam first tortured me.

Fear seeps into my body. Oh, heavens! Is she going to torture me herself? The thought has me breaking out in a cold sweat. Ember despises me; she is going to make sure I die slowly. I need to do something to get out of here and fast. Adam was a nightmare; I can't imagine Ember.

“In all my years of existence, I have never hated someone as much as I hate you,” Ember declares, pulling me from my thoughts as she takes off her jacket and hands it to the man who dragged me.

“You don’t even love Nickolas,” I say, pulling at the restraints on my hands. I didn’t succeed in freeing myself yesterday, but that doesn’t

mean I won't today. I also plan to stall her by talking while I try to figure out something.

"That's true, but I don't have to love him to see you as a threat," she responds, taking off her heels and slipping into sneakers with the man's assistance. I tug on the ropes around my legs hard, not caring as my skin burns from the action.

"But I'm not a threat to you, Ember. Nickolas doesn't love me, and neither do I love him. I am not a threat to you." I continue to pull at the restraints on my hands, hoping for a miracle.

"That's where you are wrong, Amelia," Ember retorts, collecting a bat from the man. My eyes widen as I see the silver spikes on the bat. Oh, heavens! More sweat fills my forehead. My eyes dart around the room, desperately searching for an escape route. As Ember prepares to strike, I steal a glance at the man holding me captive, searching for a hint of mercy. But his expression remains cold and impassive. "He doesn't need to love you to fuck you," she sneers, swinging the spiked bat and sending my head flying back. My jaw cracks, and blood pours from the puncture wounds on my face. I close my eyes, cringing in pain as tears fill my eyes. "Or to get you pregnant." She hits my chest, puncturing the flesh where Adam had carved. I grit my teeth, choking on the pain as fresh blood spills from my chest all the way to my stomach.

With a swift and brutal strike, she targets my knees, shattering them. I clench the chair's arm tightly, the wood cutting into my nails. My teeth grind together so hard I fear they might break any moment. I'm determined not to let Ember revel in the satisfaction of completely breaking me. Yet, with each blow, the lines between strength and vulnerability blur. My breaths become labored sweat beads on my forehead as I fight not to scream in pain.

When I think it can't get any worse, I watch in horrified disbelief as she casually drops the bat, puts on gloves, and collects a cup filled with melted silver. Dread tightens its grip on me, and I begin to thrash violently in the chair, the ropes around my hands and legs cutting into my skin, leaving a searing trail of pain. Each desperate movement burns my skin, and I can feel the last reserves of energy draining from my battered body. My heart pounds in a wild rhythm, the acrid scent of silver growing stronger with every breath as Ember draws nearer. I lose my resolve and begin to beg her for mercy.

"Please, please, Ember. Please, Ember. There are other ways to kill me," I plead, the words escaping between labored breaths. My voice trembles with terror. Yet, she remains unyielding, her sadistic smile

widening with each step.

Suddenly, my name echoes through the room just as Ember is about to pour the liquid on me. I scan urgently for the person calling me but fail to find them. As I return my sights to Ember, I notice something odd. My brows furrow in confusion. Ember is frozen in place. What's happening?

"Amelia," the voice calls again. I look around the room, searching for the owner of the voices, but I can't see them.

"Wake up," the person says. I blink again, and suddenly, Ember and everything in the room disappear. I am no longer tied to a chair.

"Wake up, Amelia, wake up," a voice I now recognize as Nickolas says.

I slowly close my eyes and gently open them back.

"Nickolas," I breathe, gasping as I say his name. He pulls me into a tight hug.

"I got you; she can't hurt you anymore," he says, tightening his arms around me. It's then it hits me that I had a dream of what happened, and I wasn't actually there anymore. I take a deep breath and wrap my arms around Nickolas's neck, squeezing hard. His scent calms me down. Tears fill my eyes, remembering that it might have been a dream, but it happened. Ember beat me up with a silver spiked bat and almost splashed me with silver if Adam hadn't come and stopped her. More tears spill from my eyes. He only stopped her because he wished to sell me once he was done with me and didn't want me to be too damaged.

"It's okay," Nickolas softly coos, his voice a soothing balm, as he gently rubs his palm down my back. Seeking solace, I tighten my arms around his neck, inhaling his scent as it works its calming magic.

"She will never be able to hurt you again," Nickolas says, his words whispered into my hair, surprising me with their reassurance. Ember is his mistress, and as much as he might not be happy, she almost tortured me to death. I can't be sure he won't allow her to continue making my life a living hell as she did before. Suddenly, I feel a sense of unease with his comforting words and pull away from him, but Nickolas doesn't let go. His arm remains steadfast around me.

"I'm okay now; you can let go," I say, my voice betraying lingering distress as I sniffle and wipe away my tears.

"I don't believe you," he responds, his grip tightening as he pulls

me even closer.

“Your Majesty, I'm fine,” I insist, pushing at his shoulders in an attempt to free myself from his hold. Unexpectedly, Nickolas curses in pain and quickly releases me. Confusion clouds my expression. Why did he react as if I had hurt him?

“I think you’re right. I will let you rest,” he says, his strained voice filling the room as he climbs out of the bed. Shock registers on my face as I see the blood, his blood, staining his shoulders that are bleeding with pierced wound marks. And dripping onto the floor.

“What happened to you?” I exclaim, rushing to his side. Without thinking, I move to touch his shoulders, but Nickolas takes a step back before my fingers even brush his shirt. I hadn't noticed the blood on my body when he held me or smelled it.

“Nothing,” he curtly replies.

“Nothing?” I arch a brow at him.

“Yes, nothing of your concern.”

“You’re bleeding through your shoulder and back.” I also notice the blood dripping on the floor from his back. He must also have an injury there. I try to go around him to see, but Nickolas makes sure I can’t by moving as I do.

“Amelia,” he grabs my arm, causing me to look up at him.

“Why are you hurt?” I ask, my concern genuine despite my reluctance to admit it. As my mate, seeing him injured tugs at my heart.

“I am fine,” he asserts, locking eyes with me in an attempt to reassure me.

“It doesn’t look like it,” I retort, my annoyance evident.

“I am telling you I am, so believe it.”

“Okay,” I concede, knowing he isn’t going to tell me how he got his injuries, so I should just drop it. He swiftly leaves my room with vampire speed, likely to conceal his back from my view.

Left alone, I run my hand across my growing hair, staring at my blood-stained sheets, lost in thought. What could have happened to Nickolas? Who would dare to attack the vampire king? My family can be ruled out, as the wounds weren't consistent with a werewolf attack. The nature of his injuries, not healing immediately, puzzles me. Also, I can’t believe he comforted me while injured and in pain. I never thought I would see such happening. I wonder what changed for him to put my needs first. I know it’s not because we

are mates, so I wonder what.

Closing my eyes, I sigh, deciding to leave the questions for later and shower. Some of Nickolas's blood got on my body. Throughout the process, my thoughts are consumed by him. Even as I change my sheets and attempt to find sleep, he remains a constant presence in my mind. The night is restless, my thoughts intertwining with questions that linger in the dark until exhaustion finally pulls me into a fitful slumber.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The early morning light filters through as I descend the stairs, determined to break free from the confines of my room. Seeking solace in the company of Beatrice, I make my way to the maid quarters, a desire for fresh air propelling me forward. A soft knock on her door precedes the anticipation of her response.

The door swings open, revealing Beatrice and her words hang in the air with unexpected weight. "Great, both of you are here together," she declares, and suddenly, the strong scent of my mate envelops my senses.

As her words linger in the air, I spin around in a desperate attempt to validate if the reality matches the unexpected revelation. In a swift turn, my head collides with his broad chest. His powerful arms encircle my waist in that instant, drawing me close. Held securely against his chest, the warmth of his body spilling into mine.

“Be careful," he cautions, his hand tenderly rubbing my forehead. Startled by the unexpected touch, I instinctively recoil. Nickolas, silent in response to my reaction, conveys more through his eyes than words ever could. In that fleeting moment, I catch a glimpse of hurt before he strides past me and enters the room.

My gaze lingers on his retreating figure, searching for any visible signs of the wounds that likely marked him just the day before. Clad in a black T-shirt, his back reveals no hints of the wound he may have. The urge to inquire about his well-being lingers on the tip of my tongue, but the unspoken understanding between us restrains me. We aren't the type of mates to exchange such intimate concerns, and I hesitate to breach that unspoken boundary, aware

that he might not offer answers even if I dared to ask.

"Are you ready?" Nickolas inquires, turning his attention to Beatrice as she reenters the room and hands him a bag.

"Yeah, we can be on our way," Beatrice replies, her movements purposeful as she heads toward the door where I stand. I can't help but feel a sense of confusion at their exchange.

"Is there something going on that I should be aware of?" I question, eyeing them both carefully as they approach me.

"You didn't tell her," Beatrice interjects, turning to face Nickolas with a pointed look.

"I didn't have the time," he resprings casually.

"Tell me what?" I demand, my confusion growing with each passing moment.

"That we were going over to my place in witch territory," Beatrice reveals, gripping my hand and leading me out of the maid quarters, with Nickolas following closely behind.

"No, and why are we going over to your place?" I ask, my mind racing with questions as we step outside the castle and approach a BMW parked out front.

"So you could bathe in the healing spring in witch territory, and hopefully, your wolf will finally wake up," Beatrice explains, opening the car's passenger door and gesturing for me to get in.

I turn to face Beatrice and envelop her in a deep hug, overwhelmed by gratitude for her selfless gesture. The mere mention of the healing spring, a sacred site to witches, fills me with a sense of awe, knowing the sacrifice it must have entailed for her sisters to grant me access as a werewolf. "Thank you so much," I express sincerely, squeezing her tightly in my embrace.

"You're welcome, dear, but stop killing me," Beatrice teases, prompting me to release her with a chuckle.

"Sorry," I apologize, a smile tugging at my lips.

"It's fine, dear, and I wasn't the main reason it's happening. Nickolas is," she reveals cryptically before making her way to the back seat, leaving me to springer her words.

I watch in a daze as Nickolas approaches the driver's side, our eyes briefly meeting before he enters the car. Her words echo in my mind, casting a shadow of doubt over my perceptions of him. Nickolas had a hand in this? It seemed inconceivable, yet the weight of Beatrice's revelation lingers in the air, leaving me stunned and unable to comprehend the implications.

"Get in the car, Amelia," Nickolas's voice jolts me from my reverie, and I quickly comply, strapping my seatbelt on as the car purrs to life.

Throughout the journey to witch territory, I find myself unable to tear my gaze away from Nickolas, my mind consumed by a whirlwind of conflicting emotions and unanswered questions. His involvement in orchestrating this trip remains shrouded in mystery, leaving me to grapple with the unsettling realization that perhaps I didn't know him as well as I thought.

We pull up to Beatrice's secluded cabin, nestled deep in the heart of the forest. Witches, known for their affinity for solitude, often find solace in secluded abodes. Beatrice's rustic cabin in the woods is no exception. The tranquil surroundings exude a sense of serenity, a sanctuary away from the chaos of the outside world.

Stepping out of the car, I'm greeted by her beautiful daughter, a living embodiment of her late husband's legacy as an air witch. I exchange heartfelt greetings with her before venturing into the depths of the forest behind Beatrice's house, where the healing spring awaits. The canopy of trees overhead casts dappled shadows on the forest floor. Nickolas trails closely behind me, his silent presence a palpable weight in the air. Though he utters not a single word, his unwavering gaze and the faint trace of his scent are unmistakable indicators of his proximity. Each step I take is shadowed by the weight of his silent observation, his penetrating gaze drilling holes into my back as we navigate through the forest.

Arriving at the spring, I anticipate Nickolas to avert his gaze while I undress, but not to my surprise; he remains rooted in place, his unwavering presence unmoving. I would have been more astonished if he had granted me privacy. Turning away from him, I begin to peel off my clothes until I am left only in my underwear. Glancing back at him, I find his eyes scanning my body, their intensity cutting through me. Prepared for disgust or disdain, I am instead met with a simmering anger, evident in the tight clench of his fists and the rigid set of his jaw. Turning away from him, I shake my head in silent frustration before immersing myself into the healing spring. A sigh escapes my lips as the warm water comes in contact with my tired muscles.

Leaning back against a smooth rock, I relish in the sensation of the water caressing my skin, the gentle embrace of the natural remedy soothing my weary body. With my eyes closed, I allow

myself to surrender to the tranquility of the moment, hoping against hope that the healing properties of this sacred spring will work their magic on Marie, coaxing her slumbering form back to consciousness.

•••

An hour later, I emerge from the spring with a heavy heart and shoulders slumped, a pout etched upon my lips.

"Nothing?" Nickolas inquires, extending a towel toward me. I accept it gratefully, wrapping it around my damp form as I shake my head in response. Despite the renewed strength coursing through my veins and the fading traces of my scars, there is still no sign of Marie stirring from her slumber.

"We'll try again tomorrow," Nickolas assures me as we begin our journey back to Beatrice's house.

And so, we repeat the ritual for the remainder of the week. Each morning and evening, I return to the healing spring in hopes of rousing my dormant wolf. Yet, each day ends in disappointment as Marie remains unresponsive.

Nickolas's fury is palpable, mirroring my own frustration with the outcome. Whether his anger stems from Marie's failure to awaken or from a perceived squandering of his deal with the witches remains uncertain to me.

Tonight marks our final evening here before we must return to the castle, as Nickolas is bound by his kingly duties.

After dinner, I bid everyone a good night and retire upstairs, the weight of disappointment heavy upon my shoulders. Despite my efforts, I still feel no connection with Marie. I climb into bed with a heavy heart, hoping for a restful night's sleep despite the turmoil within me.

Later at night, hushed voices rouse me from my slumber, but I feign sleep, hesitant to confront the source of the disturbance. However, my pretense is short-lived as a sharp jolt of pain courses through me, and I find myself wincing as fangs pierce my skin, sinking into flesh. My eyes snap open in shock, only to be met with the unexpected revelation from Marie.

"Mate!" she says. I turn to face Nickolas, realization dawning upon me that he is the one who has bitten me. His eyes, filled with an unexpected sense of joy, meet mine, causing my brows to furrow in bewilderment.

"I can’t believe it worked,” Beatrice gushes from across the room, drawing my attention away from Nickolas.

“What’s going on?” I ask, confused.

“Your wolf is back,” she exclaims.

“She’s back?” I repeat, feeling a surge of disbelief and hope wash over me. Quickly, I try to connect with Marie, and there she is. Tears of joy fill my eyes.

“Marie,” I whisper.

“Hello, Amelia,” she greets, her voice wrapping around me like a warm blanket, soothing my soul.

“I’ve missed you,” I say, feeling a rush of relief.

“Me too,” she replies softly.

“Please don’t ever leave me,” I plead.

“Never,” she promises before our connection fades.

I bring my focus back to the room, and the sight that greets me leaves me stunned. Nickolas is delicately licking the small trickle of blood from my wrist, a gesture that sends a shiver down my spine. Quickly retracting my hand, I hold it close to my chest, my heart racing. His jaw tightens, and he rises to his feet in a swift motion.

“Sleep well. We leave early tomorrow,” he states before exiting the room, leaving me to grapple with a sense of bewilderment. His recent behavior has been increasingly perplexing since my return, and I’m left pondering the reasons behind his unsettling actions.

“Goodnight, dear, and sorry for the way Nickolas did it. I told him we should wait until morning before we try, but you know him,” Beatrice apologizes, her words tinged with understanding. I nod in agreement, all too familiar with Nickolas's tendency to act on his own accord, regardless of others' suggestions.

Lying back down, my mind feels muddled with confusion. Nickolas's recent actions weigh heavily on my thoughts, leaving me grasping for clarity in a sea of uncertainty. As I close my eyes, I exhale deeply, determined to quiet my mind and find solace in sleep. The last thing I need is to spend another restless night pondering the enigma that is my mate.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The following morning, I awaken to the sound of a gentle knock on my door. As I peel the covers off my body and approach the door, my mind is already filled with worries about Marie's recovery. Despite her awakening from her coma, she is still far from fully recovered. A run in wolf form could aid in her healing, but I know Nickolas would never agree to it.

"Nickolas?" I murmur in surprise as I open the door, hardly believing he's the one standing there. I didn't even know he knew how to knock.

"Good morning, Amelia," he greets me, straightening his shoulders and flexing the muscles there slightly. I'm momentarily speechless, trying to process if I heard him correctly. Did Nickolas just say good morning to me?

"Amelia," he repeats, waving his hand in front of my face to snap me back to reality.

"Sorry." I blink rapidly as I return to the present. "You said?"

"I said good morning," he confirms.

"Wow, you really said it," I blurt out, unable to contain my shock. I watch as Nickolas's Adam's apple bobs, a clear sign of his nervousness.

"Beatrice says that taking a run in wolf form will help heal your wolf," he says.

"Talk about like-minded thinking. This is why he’s our mate," Marie interjects, momentarily diverting my attention from Nickolas. I roll my eyes at her and redirect my focus back to him. Despite my own lingering blame toward him, Marie firmly believes it's not his fault, placing responsibility squarely on Ember's shoulders.

"Yeah, it could," I agree, my mind still reeling from Nickolas's unexpected behavior.

"Unfortunately, as much as I want both your wolf to heal, I can't allow you to shift just yet. But then Beatrice suggested that walking in human form could help with muscle strength and healing," he explains, taking a deep breath before continuing. "Amelia, will you go on a walk with me?"

I freeze, utterly taken aback by his request. Did Nickolas just ask me to go on a walk with him? Is something wrong with him? First, he says good morning, and now this. Did Nickolas switch bodies with someone?

"Amelia?" he prompts, again breaking me out of my thoughts.

"Sorry. No," I reply, shaking my head.

"No?" he echoes, his brows knitting together in confusion.

"No," I repeat firmly.

"Oh," he responds, sounding slightly surprised with my response.

"Thank you for asking. Goodbye," I say quickly, closing the door before he has a chance to respond.

"Why the hell did you say no?" Marie asks as I make my way to the bathroom to shower.

"For starters, it doesn't make sense that he asked. Secondly, it would be the most awkward walk in our life. I saved us from that. You should be thanking me instead of speaking to me with that tone," I retort.

"You actually have a point. I was only thinking about how he might be thinking about trying to build something with us...I might have been unconscious after we were reduced, but I have tapped into your memory and seen the change in his behavior," Marie concedes, her tone softening with understanding.

"I have, but it's not enough. I agree the situation with Ember isn't one hundred percent his fault, but I just can't believe so yet, and that's not talking about all the other fucked up things he's done before then," I reply, my voice tinged with skepticism and lingering resentment.

"I know all these, but I have a feeling he is walking his way up to gaining your forgiveness," Marie adds, her intuition offering a glimmer of hope amidst my doubts.

"Still, Marie. Dad killed his dad. There is no future with Nickolas."

"And you are okay with that?" Her question gives me pause as I

consider my own feelings.

"I don’t know, to be honest, but I won’t deceive myself by hoping for something that will never happen," I respond firmly, preemptively cutting off any attempts at persuasion from Marie.

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After freshening up, I prepare to leave my room when a knock comes at my door. Hastily checking my appearance in the mirror, I straighten my long green maxi dress before walking to the door, hoping it’s not Nickolas again. I pull the door open, only to find Eric standing there with a broad smile.

"Great, you're already dressed to go out," he exclaims, seizing my arm and linking it with his own. Closing the door behind me, I allow him to lead me away.

"Hello to you too. I'm doing better today. Thank you for asking," I reply, unable to suppress a roll of my eyes at his enthusiasm.

"Nickolas already told me you were doing better, so I didn't see the need to ask," Eric responds with a wink, his confidence unwavering.

"How did he know?" I inquire as we exit the castle and begin walking toward the back.

"He saw it," Eric answers matter-of-factly.

"He saw it?" I echo, puzzled by his explanation.

"Her skin is glowing today, showing almost no trace of the wounds inflicted by Ember. Her eyes are full of life and flash golden, indicating her wolf is also doing better. Her cheeks are rosy, her lips are full once again," Eric elaborates, surprising me with Nickolas’s keen observation.

"He said all this?" I ask, incredulous at the level of detail Nickolas apparently shared with Eric.

"Yes," Eric confirms.

"Hmm," I reply, the thought that Marie might be right flowing through my head, but I push it aside. I conclude that Nickolas must have swapped bodies with someone because of the way he spoke to Eric about me...just didn't sound like someone who hates my guts.

“There is something I need to tell you before we reach my house,” Eric begins.

“We are going to your house?” I ask, surprised as I've never been to his place before.

“Yes, and there's someone important I want you to meet. You might already know who she is since she was held in the cell next to yours,” Eric explains, his tone serious.

I halt in my steps and turn to face him. “Lily is your mate,” I say, shocked at the twist of fate. It dawns on me that the only person important enough to Eric that he would want me to meet would be his mate.

“Yes, I am,” she confirms, standing a few feet ahead. Turning away from Eric, I see Lily standing on the porch of a beautiful bungalow. I release my arms from Eric's grip and rush toward her as she opens them wide for an embrace.

“Hello cou—” I start to say, but Lily interrupts me with a whisper.

“He doesn’t know, and it’s best he doesn’t.”

I pull away, nodding in agreement. Revealing her true identity as my cousin would put her in danger.

“Wow, if I didn’t know better, I would say you guys are sisters,” Eric remarks, and we both turn to face him. His words aren't surprising; Lily and I inherited similar features from our fathers—blonde hair and baby-blue eyes.

“Unfortunately, we are not,” Lily responds with a smile, and I nod in agreement with her statement.

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I spend the day at Eric’s house, immersed in laughter and enjoying myself. When it's time to leave, Eric kindly offers to walk me back to the castle, but I politely decline. Instead, I choose to make the journey on my own.

Walking into the castle, I notice Nickolas immediately, his demeanor radiating anger as he strides purposefully toward me. Panic grips me as I realize his fury is directed at me. What could I have possibly done to incur his wrath? I'm still reeling from my recent injuries, and the last thing I need is for him to unleash his temper on me. He grabs my arms forcefully, backing me against the nearest wall. His body trembles with pent-up rage as he looms over me.

"Where the fuck were you?" he demands, his words laced with fury. I'm taken aback by the intensity of his anger, my mind racing to come up with a plausible explanation for his sudden outburst.

"Huh?" I say, utterly shocked by his question. I had braced myself for anything but this question.

"I asked you a damn question, Amelia!" he snaps, his frustration evident as he slams his hand against the wall beside my head, startling me into grabbing onto his shirt tightly. I feel him wince, a flicker of pain crossing his features as he clenches his jaw. My brows furrow in confusion.

Why does he sound like he's in pain? Hasn't he recovered from last time? My concern for him mingles with my fear, creating a tumultuous mix of emotions as I struggle to make sense of the situation.

"Amelia," he growls, his tone demanding my attention. I swallow hard, meeting his gaze.

"I was at Eric's," I respond, my voice trembling as I look up at him, feeling small beneath his imposing presence. He towers over me, his expression still contorted with anger.

"Why the fuck didn't he pick up his phone and fucking tell me?" he bellows, his frustration boiling over despite my attempt to explain.

"I don't kno-w-w," I stutter, my voice faltering as his anger shows no sign of abating. I shrink back against the wall, overwhelmed by the force of his rage.

"Amelia," he murmurs, his touch gentle as he moves his hand to the back of my neck, his palm wrapping around it firmly. He tilts my head backward, forcing me to meet his intense gaze. Despite the anger, I find myself captivated by those mesmerizing emerald eyes, and I detect something else lurking within them. There's a depth to his gaze that I can't quite comprehend, a mixture of emotions swirling beneath the surface. "Never, I mean never make me worry about your whereabouts like that again. Do you hear me?" he insists, his voice firm as he presses the back of my neck, breaking through the haze of confusion clouding my mind. Slowly, I nod in response, tearing my gaze away from his penetrating stare. "Good," he murmurs, releasing his grip on my neck and stepping away, leaving me to ponder what just transpired.

Did he just tell me not to make him worry about me? But I didn’t do anything to make him worry in the first place. I don’t even understand what’s going on these days. I'm so freaking confused. I might lose my mind trying to figure out what’s going on? Ahh.

•••

Later in the middle of the night, I wake up feeling unbearably hot and weak. The suffocating heat drives me to throw the covers off my body and stumble to the bathroom in search of relief. But even the cold water of the shower fails to alleviate my discomfort. Instead, the heat intensifies, and now my bones ache with a deep, gnawing pain.

“Marie,” I call out. “What’s wrong?” My voice comes out raspy and breathless.

“We're going into heat,” she responds, her own breaths labored with discomfort.

“No!” I exclaim, tugging at the collar of my tank top as sweat beads on my skin.

“We need to mate, Amelia, and soon because it’s only going to get worse,” Marie insists urgently.

“Nickolas would rather die than touch us. I need to find something to help,” I reply, desperation creeping into my tone.

“Go to Beatrice. She might have an elixir that can reduce the pain,” Marie suggests.

“Yes, you’re right. Let me go,” I agree, determined to seek relief from this agonizing pain.

I take one shaky step toward the door, my heart pounding with urgency. With each stride, the heat coursing through my body intensifies, making it feel like I'm being cooked alive. I release a deep exhale, trying to steady myself before taking another step. I need to find Beatrice fast before I spiral into full-blown heat.

Managing to navigate downstairs despite the growing discomfort, I pant and struggle to catch my breath. Every movement feels like a Herculean effort as I push open Beatrice's door, only to find her room empty. Panic grips my chest as I realize she's nowhere to be seen. Where could she possibly be at this hour?

Desperation driving me, I force my scorching limbs to move as I make my way to the kitchen, hoping to find her there having a late-night snack. But my search yields no results.

"Beatrice!" I cry out, my voice strained and hoarse, reverberating against the cold stone walls as I scour every corner of the castle, searching for her, but I don’t find her. Every inch of my body is covered in a sheen of sweat that leaves me feeling sticky and uncomfortable. The exhaustion weighs heavily on me, making every

movement a struggle.

With a determined yet weary resolve, I peel myself away from the wall and stagger toward the exit of the castle. Despite the agony pulsing through my veins, I push forward, driven by the desperate need to find the only other person who can help. He would also keep Nickolas's secret that he didn't fuck me because if he did. I won't be in heat right now.

Once again, I manage to reach Eric's house, clad only in a pair of tank top and shorts. I offer a silent prayer of gratitude as the cool night breeze washes over my overheated skin, providing a momentary reprieve from the relentless heat. With trembling hands, I lift my arm to knock on the door, but the feeble sound barely registers against the backdrop of my pounding heart.

"Eric! Lily!" I call out, my voice strained and desperate as I struggle to make my presence known. Each attempt to knock on the door feels like an impossible task, my body burning with feverish intensity. Frustration and panic well up within me as I realize my efforts may be in vain.

In a last-ditch effort, I summon every ounce of energy I possess and let out a piercing scream, the sound tearing through the stillness of the night. A surge of adrenaline courses through my veins, propelling me forward, but before I can comprehend what's happening, my body reaches its limit.

I feel Lily's alarmed gaze upon me as darkness descends, enveloping me in its suffocating embrace. With a final, desperate thud, I collapse to the floor, consumed by the abyss of unconsciousness as the heat and exhaustion finally claim me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

NICKOLAS

I stare at my mate, lying prone on the ground of my best friend's porch, confusion and concern flood my mind. What the fuck is going on? My mind races with questions, but I push them aside for the moment, choosing to focus on helping her first.

Rushing over to her side, I quickly lift her up into my arms, a surge of adrenaline coursing through me as I take in her scent. It hits me like a wave, overwhelming my senses and leaving me momentarily disoriented. Why does she smell so fucking good? I stumble back a bit, her body clinging to mine as she sweats profusely.

"What's going on?" I demand, my voice laced with worry as I gaze down at her, searching for any signs of distress or injury. Despite the chaos of the moment, her proximity sends a jolt of unexpected arousal coursing through me, leaving me feeling conflicted and off-balance. But right now, all that matters is making sure she's okay.

Gritting my teeth, I tighten my hold on her and follow Eric's mate inside the house. Once inside, I carefully lay her down on the bed in the guest room, my concern growing with each passing moment. Pulling out my phone, I dial Beatrice's number, urgency evident in my voice as I explain the situation and request her immediate assistance.

As I'm on the phone, Eric enters the room, his expression mirroring my own concern. His mate quickly fills him in on what we both witnessed, and I listen intently, absorbing every detail she adds that I didn’t in an effort to understand what's happening to my

mate. Despite the fear and uncertainty swirling around us, I'm grateful for the support of Eric and his mate, knowing that we're all in this together.

"She's in heat," Eric blurts out, his words hitting me like a ton of bricks.

"What?" I exclaim, my eyes widening in disbelief as I turn to him for confirmation.

"You're right, baby, she is. I can't believe I didn't see it immediately," Lily chimes in, using a towel from the bathroom to dab away some of Amelia's sweat.

My mind reels with shock and confusion at the revelation. The thought of Amelia truly being in heat sends a shiver down my spine.

"Mate, do you mind giving us some privacy?" Eric's voice cuts through the tumult of my thoughts, his tone firm but gentle.

"Sure, I'll be on the front porch waiting for Beatrice to arrive," Lily responds, pressing a kiss to Eric's lips before making her exit.

Once we're alone, the weight of the situation bears down on me, and I can't help but curse under my breath. "Fuck! Why the hell did she leave her room if she was in heat? Does she even realize what could have happened if someone other than us found her?"

"I think she did. That's why she came here," Eric offers, attempting to soothe my rising agitation with his calm demeanor.

"Why didn't she look for me? I'm fucking next door!" I burst out, the frustration and confusion bubbling to the surface as I grapple with the implications of Amelia's actions. It's not just about her being in heat; it's about the choices she made while in such a vulnerable state.

Amelia left the safety of the castle and walked ten minutes to Eric's place, all while she was burning inside with her heat. She chose to endure the agony alone rather than seeking me out for help. The realization hits me like a punch to the gut, leaving me reeling with a mix of hurt and betrayal. A part of me couldn't believe it. How could she not reach out to me, her supposed mate, in her time of need? As the weight of my own emotions threatens to overwhelm me, I can't help but question my own actions and feelings. Why do I care so much?

The realization that I've just referred to her as my mate also sends a shiver down my spine. What the heck is wrong with me? I ask myself, grappling with the conflicting emotions swirling inside

me. First, I take pity on her and treat her like a human being, and now I acknowledge her as my mate. It's a maddening contradiction, and I'm not sure how to make sense of it all. But one thing's for certain: things between us are far more complicated than I ever could have imagined.

"Nickolas," Eric's voice cuts through the tension, pulling me from my swirling thoughts.

"What?" I snap, my frustration seeping into my tone, even though he's not the one I'm angry at. Eric raises an eyebrow at me, and I huff in annoyance before taking a seat beside Amelia's bed.

"I don't know what's got your panties in a bunch, but whatever it is, get it sorted because we have bigger problems at hand," Eric asserts, his voice tinged with urgency.

"I know," I mutter, my gaze fixed on Amelia's still form. Why did she leave the castle wearing nothing but a tank top, with her nipples so easily visible? What if she had fainted and some pervert had found her? The thought sends a surge of anger coursing through me, my fists clenching involuntarily at the mere notion.

"So, you'll fuck her?" Eric's question snaps me away from the thoughts of ripping someone to shreds if they so much as think of fucking Amelia.

"I don't think whether I want to matters," I admit bitterly, my jaw clenched tight with pent-up frustration.

"Why do you say so?" Eric inquires, his tone laced with curiosity.

"She walked to your house while burning internally, and I live fucking next door. I think that speaks volumes," I reply, my voice heavy with resignation.

"Oh," Eric responds quietly, understanding dawning in his eyes.

"Yeah," I mumble in agreement.

"I'll go and call Beatrice to find out what's taking her so long," Eric offers, moving toward the door to leave.

"Sure," I reply, my mind still reeling with the implications of Amelia's actions.

Amelia begins to stir awake as he leaves, and my heart sinks. Beatrice isn't here to give her something for the pain, and I dread having to break the bad news to her. I watch her closely, waiting for her to open her eyes, preparing myself for the difficult conversation ahead.

"Nick..." she starts but quickly corrects herself. "Your Majesty,

where am I?" Her voice is groggy, and I can sense her confusion.

"Eric's guest bedroom," I reply, my frustration simmering beneath the surface.

"Oh," she murmurs softly, her response devoid of any further explanation. My jaw clenches in frustration.

She's still not going to ask for my help, is she? "Why didn't you come to look for me?" I blurt out, unable to contain my irritation any longer.

"For what?" she responds, her tone tinged with confusion.

"Really?" I retort, raising an eyebrow incredulously at her.

"I don't understand," she admits, her eyes searching mine for answers.

"You're really going to pretend you aren't in heat right now and need me to fuck you?" I burst out, my frustration boiling over as I confront her blatant denial. She remains silent, her eyes fixed on mine, and I can sense the tension crackling between us.

"Fucking say something," I demand.

"Why bother when I know you would rather let a man fuck you than touch me?" Amelia retorts, her words hitting me like a punch to the gut.

"That was before," I reply softly, the weight of my confession hanging heavy in the air.

"Before what?" she demands, but I don't voice the truth.

It was before I started seeing you as more than just your father's daughter or Jane's descendant. Before I started seeing you as someone I might actually care about.

"Can you please leave?" Amelia's request shocks me.

"Why?" I ask, a crease forming on my brow as I struggle to comprehend her sudden desire for me to go.

"Because every part of me wants to be touched by you, and you aren't going to," Amelia declares boldly, her words sending a jolt through me.

I'm taken aback by her directness. She's always been shy around me, so her boldness catches me off guard. I meet her gaze, finding desire burning brightly in her eyes, and my resolve begins to waver.

Running my eyes down her face to her neck and chest, I feel my arousal spike as I notice the sheen of sweat on her skin, her cleavage glistening in the dim light. Her nipples harden under my scrutiny, and I can't tear my gaze away. My eyes continue their

journey down her body, taking in her exposed long legs accentuated by the shorts she's wearing. I watch as they instinctively pull together, and I feel a surge of desire coursing through me.

I've wanted to fuck Amelia since the first day I met her, and now, faced with her raw desire, I can't resist the pull any longer. Standing up, I make a split-second decision. I scoop her into my arms and carry her out of the room. As much as my best friend Eric loves me, I doubt he would appreciate me fucking my mate in his house. I bid farewell to Eric and Lily, making a mental note to thank them later, and ask Eric to call Beatrice, informing her that her services won't be required tonight. With Amelia in my arms, desire coursing through both of us, I know exactly what to do.

AMELIA

My heart pounds with every step Nickolas takes back to the castle. Thoughts race through my mind, consumed by the uncertainty of what awaits us upon our return. Will he truly take me tonight? And more importantly, do I want him to?

Yes, there's an undeniable craving and desire for my mate's touch coursing through every fiber of my being. But I can't say I'm entirely ready to fulfill that desire. The burning heat in my bones has lessened merely by having him close to me, his presence alone enough to soothe the heat.

Snuggled against his chest, I find solace in the familiar scent that emanates from him, the scent that both calms the raging fire within me and sets my heart racing with anticipation. With each steady beat of his heart beneath my ear, I find myself torn between longing for his touch and the hesitance to surrender to it completely.

I feel his gaze lingering on me, a weighty presence that I can't ignore. When I finally summon the courage to meet his eyes, he's staring straight ahead, his expression unreadable. I can't help but wonder what thoughts are swirling through his mind at this moment.

Nickolas has always been distant, never showing any outward signs of attraction or affection, despite the undeniable bond we share as mates. The idea of him willingly sleeping with me to ease my pain is both surprising and perplexing. It's a gesture I never expected from him.

I snap out of my thoughts as Nickolas carries me into my bedroom. My heart begins to race again as he lays me down on the

bed. I part my lips, intending to tell him that I'm not ready, but I realize I don't have to as he moves away from the edge of my bed and exits the room.

Confusion washes over me as I look around the room, trying to make sense of what just happened. I had assumed he was going to stay with me tonight. I can't believe he isn't. It's not that I'm disappointed or hurt, but rather surprised. I know I might sound hypocritical, but that's not it. If anyone should be the reason we aren't sleeping together tonight, it should be me.

My body begins to burn again as Nickolas's touch fades. I wince and curl into a ball on the bed, trying to endure the intense pain coursing through me. It's agonizing, almost unbearable.

Forcing myself to move, I slowly uncurl and slide to the side of the bed, my muscles protesting with each movement. I need to head to the bathroom to bathe and try to soothe the fire raging inside me. As I attempt to stand, my feet make contact with something unexpected. Looking down, I freeze at the sight before me, goosebumps spreading across my skin.

Nickolas's hands are wrapped around my feet, but before I can fully comprehend what's happening, he quickly releases them and stands up. Confusion floods my mind. Why is he back? What does he want?

I ignore him as a wave of pain crashes over me, gripping my lower belly like a relentless fire. I clutch my abdomen with both arms, feeling tears welling up in my eyes from the sheer intensity of the pain.

"Give me your hands." Nickolas's voice cuts through the haze of agony. I glance up at him, sweat dripping from my face, and I feel my chest heaving with each labored breath.

“Why?” I rasp, my voice strained.

“Just do it,” he commands, his tone firm and authoritative. Reluctantly, I extend my hands in front of me, unsure of what he intends to do. My eyes widen in disbelief as he produces handcuffs from his back pocket and cuffs me. I stare, my breath catching in my throat.

“What are you doing?” I ask, but Nickolas ignores me. He lifts my legs and tosses them back onto the bed, his actions both commanding and assertive. I continue to stare at him, bewildered by his actions. Before I can utter a word, he grabs my hands and pulls them toward the headboard, securing them with the

handcuffs.

“Your Majesty,” I call out, my confusion growing with each passing moment.

"Yes, Amelia," he responds, meeting my gaze with a steady intensity that sends a shiver down my spine. In that moment, as our eyes lock, I see something new flickering within his gaze. It's not just determination or control—it's desire, raw and unbridled.

My breath catches in my throat as the realization hits me like a wave crashing over me. I had misjudged him and misunderstood his intentions entirely. The heat in his eyes speaks volumes, igniting a fire within me that I hadn't anticipated.

Suddenly, the air feels charged with an electrifying tension, a palpable longing that hangs heavy between us. Despite my initial fear and confusion, a part of me can't deny the rush of excitement that courses through me at the sight of him, boundless desire mirrored in his gaze.

Nickolas retrieves something from his pocket. My curiosity piques, and I strain to see what he's holding. Only when he moves closer do I realize it's a blindfold. Confusion swirls within me. Why does he want to shield my eyes? What does he have planned?

Despite the questions swirling in my mind, I hesitate to voice them, a flicker of trust in Nickolas urging me to surrender to the unknown. As he slowly covers my eyes, darkness envelops me, plunging me into a world of uncertainty. The absence of sight heightens my other senses, amplifying the sound of my racing heart and the anticipation coursing through my veins.

In the darkness, I'm acutely aware of his presence, the subtle shift of the air around us as he moves. Each moment feels charged with tension, anticipation coiling in the pit of my stomach as I wait for his next move. A part of me longs to reach out, to grasp onto something tangible in this sea of darkness. However, I force myself to remain still, to trust in Nickolas and whatever plans he has in store.

Nickolas's hand grazes my waist, and a sharp intake of breath escapes my lips, my body instinctively reacting to his touch. I feel the fabric of my shorts being pulled down, his knuckles brushing against my skin with a feather-light touch that sends shivers down my spine. With each passing moment, the air between us crackles with an undeniable tension, thick with desire.

Next, it's my tank top, but before I can register his intentions, it's

torn away, leaving me exposed to him. My hands, bound to the bed, render me helpless, amplifying the intensity of the moment. My breath hitches in my throat as I feel his gaze on me, tracing the contours of my body with an intensity that leaves me breathless.

I wish I could see his face, to read his expression, and understand what he thinks of me in this moment. Despite the wounds that have healed over time, the scars that mar my skin haven't faded completely. I can't help but wonder if there's a hint of disgust in his eyes as he looks at me, exposed and raw.

I hear the ruffling of clothes, and I assume he's undressing. I know I need to tell him now before it's too late. I wet my lips nervously, mustering the courage to voice my hesitation.

"Your Majesty," I begin, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes," he responds, and I sense the shift in the bed beside me. Time is slipping away, urging me to speak quickly.

"I'm not ready," I blurt out, feeling his presence looming over me. The words tumble out in a rush, my heart pounding in my chest.

"I know." His voice is gentle and soothing as he leans in closer, his presence enveloping me.

Before I can fully process his response, I feel the warmth of his lips pressing against the nape of my neck, sending a jolt of pleasure coursing through me. My body reacts instinctively, arching toward him, craving more of his touch.

"I am only getting naked so my skin can touch yours to make you feel better," he explains, his fingers trailing a path along my inner thigh. I inhale sharply, feeling a rush of wetness pooling in my lower region at his touch.

His shadow above me disappears, and a whimper of longing escapes my lips, but it transforms into a startled "O" as I feel him behind me, his presence overwhelming and intoxicating. Every inch of him presses against me, his hardness pressing into my ass as he molds himself to my form.

His hands glide sinuously from my ankles to my waist, sending shivers down my spine with each caress. I can feel the heat radiating from his body, enveloping me in a cocoon of desire.

"Don't worry, little one," his voice, low and husky, sends a thrill through me, "you will be the one begging me to leave you by the time I'm done."

His words hang in the air like a promise, igniting a flame of

desire within me that threatens to consume me whole. Before I can fully comprehend his meaning, his lips find my earlobe, nibbling gently and sending shockwaves of pleasure coursing through me. My back arches instinctively, seeking more of his touch, more of the intoxicating sensations he elicits with each tantalizing caress.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Nickolas's hand rests gently on my waist. A shiver runs down my spine as he presses kisses to my neck and shoulders. My eyes, already blinded by the blindfold, instinctively close as a soft moan escapes my lips, betraying the pleasure his touch elicits.

With each tender kiss, he explores every inch of my skin, leaving a trail of fire in his wake. My hands ache to reach out, to tangle in his hair and pull him closer, but the cuffs restrain me, keeping me tethered to the bed.

As his lips continue their tantalizing journey, I can't help but wonder if that's why he cuffed my hands—to deny me the ability to touch him, to leave me at the mercy of his every whim. The thought sends a thrill through me, heightening the intensity of the moment.

Nickolas's hand on my waist begins to inch closer to my core, igniting a throbbing need that pulses through my body. The mere thought of him actually inserting a finger into me has me quivering with desire, my senses heightened to the point of overload.

I've read countless scenes like this in books over the years, but nothing compares to the visceral experience of actually living it. Despite Nickolas not having done much to my body yet, I can feel myself teetering on the edge of my release.

Every nerve in my body is alight with the promise of pleasure yet to come, my skin tingling with the electric charge of desire.

My breath catches in my throat as I feel his hand brush tantalizingly close to my core, but instead, he continues upward, tracing a path across my belly and toward my hardened nipples. As his fingers encircle one, pulling gently and massaging it, a soft moan escapes my lips, my back arching in pleasure.

"Nickolas," I moan his name, my voice a breathless plea for more.

"Tell me what you want, Amelia. Tell me," he whispers, his warm breath sending shivers down my spine as he peppers my burning skin with kisses. Each touch, each caress, pushes me further toward the edge of ecstasy, leaving me trembling with desire and anticipation.

"I want you to touch me," I rasp, my voice breathless with desire, my body eager for him to fulfill my every craving.

“That’s my girl,” he murmurs against my skin, his words sending a wave of unexpected happiness coursing through me, hearing him say that to me.

Do I have a praise kink?

I’m not given time to dwell on that as he moves his hand from my other breast, now focusing his attention on massaging and pulling my nipples between his fingers. With each caress, wetness pools in my core, aching for his touch there.

Finally, his hand moves lower, and I gasp, holding my breath as I feel his fingers where I've longed for them all night. His touch sends jolts of pleasure coursing through me as his fingers trace the outer walls of my core, teasing me mercilessly.

"So wet," he rasps, his voice thick with desire as he inserts a finger into me, sending waves of pleasure crashing over me. I arch my back, lost in the ecstasy of his touch, surrendering completely to the intoxicating sensations he elicits with each skillful movement of his finger.

"Nickolas," I moan out, unable to contain the overwhelming pleasure coursing through me. For a moment, panic seizes me, fearing I may have ruined the moment with my outburst. But to my surprise, Nickolas responds by inserting another finger, intensifying the sensations that threaten to consume me.

I clench my fists, the need to grab onto something overwhelming me as pleasure washes over me in waves.

"How much do you want it, little one?" he asks, his voice sending shivers down my spine as he moves slowly in and out of me, alternating between torturing me and granting me exquisite pleasure.

"Bad," I reply, my voice breathless with need.

"Tell me how bad, little one," he demands, retracting his fingers, and a cry of desperation escapes my lips, yearning for release.

"Bad, Nickolas. I want it, bad" I confess, feeling a surge of desire

coursing through me as he surprises me by inserting his fingers into my core, not just one this time. My back arches instinctively, and my toes curl at the sheer pleasure of his touch, my eyes rolling back in ecstasy. "Nickolas," I moan his name, each syllable a testament to the overwhelming pleasure radiating through my body. He moves with deliberate slowness, each thrust increasing the intensity of my pleasure until I'm gasping for air, completely lost in the sensations he elicits.

As he picks up the pace, driving me closer to the edge, my nails dig into my palms, a desperate attempt to anchor myself amidst the rising tide of ecstasy. The pressure builds in the pit of my belly, sending waves of pleasure crashing over me with each movement until I'm teetering on the brink of release, ready to surrender completely to the intoxicating pleasure of Nickolas's fingers.

"I'm coming," I cry out, unable to contain the overwhelming pleasure coursing through me.

"Let go, little one, cum for me all over the sheets," Nickolas murmurs, his words sending a thrill through me as he thrusts into my core harder, creating splashing sounds in the quiet room. My toes curl in ecstasy as I feel him hitting that perfect spot, and in mere seconds, I feel myself unraveling, surrendering completely to the pleasure coursing through my body.

With a final surge of intensity, I come undone in my bed, waves of ecstasy crashing over me as Nickolas's fingers push me over the edge, leaving me breathless and utterly spent in the aftermath of our passionate encounter.

Nickolas slowly withdraws his fingers from inside me. The sound of him licking his fingers catches me by surprise, and my eyes widen in disbelief. I had expected him to clean my juices from my core with tissue or something, not do that.

"You taste fucking amazing, little one," he rasps into my ear, his words sending a shiver down my spine. I want to thank him for helping me through the pain, but suddenly, I feel too weak, too overwhelmed by the intensity of our encounter, to even open my mouth.

"Sleep," he commands gently, his voice lulling me into a state of blissful surrender. With a contented sigh, I feel my eyes slowly close as sleep washes over me, carrying me away to a realm of sweet dreams and profound tranquility.

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I wake up, my hands ache, a silent reminder of the events of the previous night. Nickolas has removed the blindfold, but my hands remain bound to the headboard above me. I turn my head to the other side of the bed, searching for any sign of him, but it's empty.

A pang of emptiness washes over me, though I can't say I'm entirely surprised. I knew deep down that waking up to an empty bed was inevitable after last night. Part of me longs for his presence, even as I remind myself that his touch was born out of duty rather than desire. Tears well up in my eyes as I grapple with the harsh reality of my situation.

I sniffle softly, a single tear escaping as I come to terms with the fact that this is now my life—a life filled with longing and unfulfilled desires. I wish things could be different, but I know deep down that they can't.

The urge to relieve myself draws my attention, and I shift uncomfortably, wondering why Nickolas didn't uncuff my hands before he left.

As I lie in bed, my hands still bound to the headboard, I rack my brain for any possible way to free myself from my restraints. With each passing moment, the urgency to relieve myself grows, and I pray fervently that my bladder won't betray me before I can find a solution.

Frustration mounts as I come up empty-handed, unable to find anything nearby that could aid in my escape. Desperate for distraction, I turn my thoughts to my family—their well-being, their safety. I hope and pray that they have received the medical treatment they need and are on the path to recovery.

But amidst my concerns for them, another thought lingers—a silent plea that they do not attempt to rescue me. The last thing I want is for them to put themselves in harm's way by trying to save me. As long as Nickolas remains unaware of their whereabouts, I stand a chance of surviving this ordeal. Their rescue would only serve to deliver them into the hands of my mate on a silver platter.

The urgency to relieve myself reaches a critical point; I can no longer suppress the desperate need clawing at my insides. With no other options left, I summon all the courage I can muster and scream out Nickolas's name, heedless of the consequences that may follow.

The sound of the door bursting open causes me to jump, but I find myself face-to-face with Nickolas, water dripping down his chest. My heart sinks as I realize that I must have inadvertently spilled his tea on him in my frantic outburst. Not only have I called him by his name, but I've also managed to drench him in the process.

A sense of dread washes over me as I brace myself for his inevitable wrath. I fear that he will be furious with me for my impudence, and the thought of facing his anger fills me with a sense of dread. It seems that I may have sealed my fate even before the humiliating act of wetting the bed can occur.

I part my lips to explain why I called him as he scans the room for danger, likely assuming that's the reason for my earlier scream. However, my words fade away as I find myself completely distracted by the sight of him standing before me.

My mouth hangs open as my body forgets entirely that I was on the verge of peeing on my bed, mesmerized by the sheer beauty of the man in front of me.

My gaze lingers on his chiseled abs, visible through his wet shirt, and I can't help but trace the lines with my eyes, feeling a heat ignite within me at the sight. Pulling my knees together, I continue to drink in his appearance, admiring the breadth of his shoulders and the definition of his biceps. He's so incredibly hot and handsome, with his beautiful green eyes and perfectly chiseled jawline. Such a sad thing he’s the enemy.

"Amelia," he calls, pulling me from thoughts of eye fucking him.

"Yes?" I respond, finally tearing my gaze away from his captivating body.

"Why the fuck did you scream my name like that?" he demands, his irritation evident in his tone.

"I need to pee," I blurt out, squeezing my thighs together in a desperate attempt to suppress the urgent need that had momentarily slipped my mind in the midst of my distraction.

"Oh, give me a second to get the key," Nickolas says before leaving the room. He returns swiftly with the key in hand, and I briefly consider asking him why he didn't unlock it before he left, but I decide against it, knowing him too well.

Once he's done freeing me from the cuffs, Nickolas suddenly lifts me off the bed. "You don't have to carry me. I'm feeling better today," I protest gently as he carries me into the bathroom, his scent

enveloping me like a warm blanket.

"I didn't ask you if you were," Nickolas retorts as he places me on the toilet seat.

As I sit there, expecting him to leave, Nickolas surprises me by remaining in the bathroom with me. Raising a questioning brow at him, I wonder why he's still here.

"Why aren't you peeing?" he asks, his question catching me off guard and leaving me momentarily speechless. I stare at him with widened eyes, shocked that he would even ask such a thing.

"I am waiting for you to leave," I reply, stating the obvious in hopes that he'll take the hint.

"Why?" he presses, still not getting it, which continues to surprise me, but then it's Nickolas.

"Because…" I begin, but my words falter, unable to articulate why I find it uncomfortable to have him present while I use the bathroom. "Can you wait outside while I use the bathroom?" I finally ask, hoping he'll understand my discomfort and respect my privacy.

"No!" His reply is curt, leaving no room for argument.

"But I can't. What if I need to…" I trail off, unable to voice the embarrassing possibility that I might need to use the bathroom for more than just urinating.

"Need to what?" he prompts, the crease between his brows deepening as he scrutinizes my reaction.

"You know," I mutter, feeling my face flush with embarrassment. I can't believe I'm having this conversation with Nickolas.

"What?" he demands, his tone bordering on annoyance.

"What if I need to...fucking poo?" I blurt out, unable to contain my embarrassment any longer. Closing my eyes, I brace myself for his reaction, feeling utterly mortified by the situation.

"Oh..." His response is unexpected, and he moves closer to me, bending down to grab my chin gently.

"Once you are done freshening up, come to my room. Don't disappear anywhere. Do you hear me?" he instructs, his tone firm but strangely protective.

"Yes," I reply, meeting his gaze and wondering why he's suddenly acting so possessive.

"Good. See you once you are done, little one," he murmurs, placing a soft kiss on my forehead before straightening up and leaving the bathroom, leaving me to ponder his behavior in

confusion.

Sitting on the toilet seat, I couldn't shake the shock of what had just happened. Nickolas, in a sudden and unexpected move, had not only called me by the nickname he gave me yesterday but also planted a tender kiss on my forehead. The mixture of confusion, disbelief, and a hint of warmth lingered in the air, leaving me utterly bewildered. Was Nickolas unwell? Or was there something deeper at play?

Unable to answer these questions myself, I decide to just bathe for now. But even under the soothing stream of hot water in the shower, my mind continued to race with questions. Each droplet seemed to echo the tumultuous thoughts swirling within me. What did his actions mean? Why would he show such unexpected tenderness? The steam enveloped me, mirroring the fog of uncertainty clouding my mind.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I step out of the shower and clad myself in a sundress in my closet. It struck me then that I have been wearing these a lot. I head to Nickolas's main room door, not our adjourning one. I knock but no answer and knock again. Each knock reverberates through the silence, the sound echoing in the empty hallway. Seconds stretch into eternity as I wait for a response, but none comes. With a hesitant hand, I reach for the doorknob and push the door open, the creaking hinges breaking the quiet of the room. He made it very clear about wanting me to come over once I was done.

"Your Majesty?" I call out softly, stepping into the room and closing the door behind me with a gentle click. The room is bathed in a soft, golden light filtering through the pulled-back curtains, but there's no sign of Nickolas.

I also didn't make the mistake of calling him by his name as I did last night and this morning. Perhaps he pardoned my slip-up, considering the whirlwind of emotions his touch stirred within me. His fingers traced paths on my skin, igniting sensations I thought were only possible in dreams. I can still feel the warmth of his touch lingering on my skin, a ghostly reminder of the intimacy we shared.

As I recall the events of last night, my cheeks flush with heat, the memory of his touch setting my skin ablaze once more. Despite the circumstances that brought us together, I can't help but cherish those fleeting moments of connection with him. Even if it was only for a moment, I know I'll forever hold onto the memory of his touch, a bittersweet reminder of what could have been.

But as the reality of our situation sinks in, I can't help but

wonder if last night was just a temporary respite from the chaos that surrounds us. I decide to forget about it for now and look for him.

I begin to search every corner of the room but no sign of him. Feeling a sense of defeat creeping in, I finally take a seat at the reading desk by his bed, the polished wood cool against my skin. I wait in the quiet solitude of his room. He asked me to come here so he will probably be back soon.

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I stare at the clock as it strikes four p.m., realizing that it's been hours since I arrived at Nickolas's room to wait for him. My stomach growls in protest, reminding me of my hunger. At this point, I would gladly eat anything Nickolas offers me without hesitation.

Giving up waiting for him, I step out of his room and make my way down to the kitchen in search of something to eat. However, it comes as no surprise to find that there's nothing readily available, and the chef refuses to prepare anything for me without Nickolas or Beatrice's permission.

Frustration mounts as I consider my options, but then I remember that I haven't seen Beatrice in a while. I wonder why that is and decide to look for either her or Nickolas to seek permission for food. After all, I can't continue to ignore the gnawing hunger in my stomach for much longer.

I search for Nickolas in his office and Beatrice in her room but no luck. I begin to wonder if Beatrice has left the castle. It wouldn't be uncommon for workers like her to take leave, but I wish she had informed me before she left. With no other options for food in the castle, I decide to head to Eric's house. They would definitely have food there, and if not, Lily knows how to cook, so I should be safe.

I knock on their door, and it's opened by Lily, who greets me with a warm smile, clearly happy to see me.

"I'm so happy you're doing fine today, Amelia. I was worried you were going to die from the pain last night," Lily says, pulling me into a tight hug.

"Me too. Did you already eat lunch?" I inquire as we pull apart, my stomach growling in anticipation.

"Yeah, why do you ask?" Lily responds, curiosity evident in her tone as I make my way into her kitchen, scanning her fridge for

something to eat.

"I'm dying of hunger coz, could you whip something up for me to eat?" Cooking isn't my forte, so I don't even bother asking if I could use her kitchen to prepare a meal myself instead.

"Amelia!" Lily whisper-yells as she slaps her hand over my mouth. I lift a questioning brow at her, my eyes widening in shock at her sudden reaction.

"Do you want to get the both of us killed?" she whispers, her expression grave. I stare at her, my brow furrowed, wondering what she's talking about. Then it hits me. I called her "coz."

My eyes widen in terror, realizing my mistake. I can't believe I almost got us in trouble. I stretch my neck, looking toward the entrance for Eric, praying he didn't hear me.

"I'm so sorry, Lily. It slipped," I apologize, feeling remorseful for my carelessness.

"I know, but you have to be careful. If not, we will both get in big trouble," Lily warns, her voice tinged with concern.

"You don't have to remind me," I whisper, my voice tinged with a hint of fear. Nickolas may have been nice enough to pleasure me last night, but I have no doubt that he would use Lily to force me to give up the locations where my family could possibly be. I can endure any torture that comes my way to keep that information hidden forever, but I can't say I won't cave if he hurts Lily. The mere thought sends a shiver down my spine.

"Amelia," Eric calls as he walks into the kitchen. I jump in my seat, my heart pounding in my chest as I wonder if he might have heard us and deliberately waited a few seconds to reveal himself. The fear of being caught grips me, and I hastily attempt to compose myself, masking any traces of suspicion or unease.

"Hi, Eric," I greet him, forcing a fake smile onto my face as he approaches. I pray he can't sense the unease that washes over me from his arrival.

"I'm so happy to see you doing better," he says warmly, returning my smile as he takes a seat nearby.

"Yeah, me too," I respond, keeping up the facade of cheerfulness despite the sinking feeling in my stomach. I watch as Lily and Eric share a look, their faces lighting up with shared amusement as they glance back at me.

"What?" I ask, feeling confused by their sudden change in demeanor and wondering why they're looking at me like that.

"I'm surprised Nickolas let you out of his sight," Eric remarks, still smiling at me.

Wait! Do they think Nickolas and I did the deed?

Before I can correct the misunderstanding, Lily cuts me off. "Don’t make her feel uncomfortable, honey," she interjects.

“Okay, sorry,” Eric says, his eyes still shining with happiness. I pause, considering whether to correct him again. But then I realize that what Nickolas and I do in private is our business, and there's no need to explain ourselves to anyone else.

"So, what brings you over?" Eric asks, changing the subject.

"I'm starving, and there’s no food at the castle," I confess, my stomach growling in agreement.

"That's expected," Eric responds with a wink, and Lily playfully slaps his shoulder, silently urging him to stop teasing me. If only he knew there was nothing to tease about. Yes, Nickolas touched me, and just the thought of it had my knees weak, but it's different from what they think we did.

"You came right on time. I'm about to start making dinner," Lily announces, moving to the fridge and pulling out some ingredients.

"Thank heavens, but could you order something for me while you cook? I'm so hungry I might cave into my other instincts," I plead. Cooking usually takes an hour or more, and I'm so famished I could eat a burger now and still devour dinner later.

"Sure, we can," Eric agrees readily.

"Ah, you're the best. I love you," I exclaim gratefully, giving Eric a quick peck on the cheek as relief floods through me.

"Amelia!" Someone growls behind me, the tone sending a shiver down my spine. I freeze as my body recognizes that voice instantly.

Why is he angry with me now? I don’t recall doing anything wrong. Slowly turning around, I come face to face with Nickolas, who's seething with anger, his expression enough to send a chill down my spine. Oh heavens, what have I done now?

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CHAPTER THIRTY

I walk to the dinner table with Lily holding a bowl of salad. She has just finished making dinner, and we are about to sit down and eat. Luckily for me, Nickolas didn't tear into me earlier, as I feared he might. Instead, he simply glared at me for a few seconds before leaving with Eric to go somewhere. Lily assures me they should be arriving back any minute, and I'm surprised to hear her mention that Nickolas will also be joining us for dinner.

Speaking of the devils, I hear them enter the house and catch a whiff of their scent as they approach Lily and me. Despite my relief, a sense of uncertainty still lingers as I wonder what Nickolas's mood will be like during dinner.

Eric walks over to Lily and pulls her into a deep kiss upon reaching the dinner table. I can't help but smile as I watch them; they are so happy and in love. My cousin wasn't unlucky like me. Despite having a vampire for a mate, her fate seems much brighter than mine.

However, as I revel in their happiness, I feel someone's eyes on me and turn to see that it's Nickolas. He just stares at me with his piercing green eyes, scrutinizing every little detail of my face and body. His intense gaze feels like it's burning into me, and I quickly tear my eyes away, feeling a sense of discomfort wash over me. I can't help but wonder what he's thinking about as he stares at me so intensely.

Once Eric and Lily are finally able to pull away from their affectionate moment, Eric and Nickolas head upstairs to wash up before joining Lily and me again at the dinner table. This time, Lily and I are already seated. We left the head of the table empty for Nickolas, as he is the king, and reserved his right side for Eric. Lily takes her seat beside him. I am seated opposite Eric and to the left

of Nickolas. As they walk down and take their seats, a tense atmosphere settles over the table. The first half of dinner goes relatively well, with me regaling Eric with humorous tales about all the antics Lily got up to when she was young. I fabricate a story about us growing up together, claiming that her family served the crown. Nickolas remains silent throughout the meal, not uttering a single word since we started eating. I steal some glances at him from across the table, only to find him staring back at me with the same intense expression he had earlier. His unwavering gaze sends a shiver down my spine, leaving me feeling uneasy.

I move to push my hair behind my ear. I'm startled when someone else does it for me. My fork slips from my fingers, clattering to the floor as I feel Nickolas's hand on my hair. Startled, I turn to face him, my eyes wide with confusion as I wonder why he would offer such a small gesture of assistance. However, he remains silent, returning his focus to his meal without a word.

Turning back to my food, I raise a questioning brow at Eric, silently seeking an explanation for Nickolas's unexpected behavior. Eric's response is a subtle shake of his head, indicating that he, too, is perplexed by the gesture. The encounter leaves me feeling unsettled and puzzled, wondering what could have prompted such a strange action from Nickolas.

We finish dinner, I help Lily with the dishes before we move to the living room to watch TV. It's been ages since I've indulged in some television time. As I approach the three-arm couch, intending to sit beside Eric, someone suddenly grabs my hand, causing me to yelp in surprise. I'm pulled toward Nickolas, who then seats me on his lap. Frozen in place, I don't dare move or even breathe as his scent fills my nostrils, and his breath fans my neck, sending shivers down my spine. What on earth is going on?

Seeking an explanation, I glance at Eric, but he merely shakes his head and turns away, pretending as if me being on Nickolas's lap isn't the slightest bit unusual. His indifference only adds to my confusion and unease.

I choose to ignore the situation momentarily and focus on trying to enjoy the movie, pushing aside the fact that my ass is positioned just above Nickolas's groin. Halfway through the film, Lily excuses herself to get more popcorn, and Eric follows her out of the room. Suddenly, my heart rate accelerates as I realize that Nickolas and I are now alone in the room.

"Amelia," he whispers, his warm breath sending shivers down my spine.

"Yes?" I respond, my voice trembling with anticipation, every nerve on edge.

"What did I tell you this morning, Amelia?" he asks, his tone low and captivating as he trails his fingertips along my thigh, igniting a fire within me.

"Please, be more specific, Your Majesty," I manage to say, my heart racing with a mixture of fear and desire.

Nickolas's touch sends a jolt of electricity through me as his hand slips under the fabric of my dress, his fingers tracing a path up my leg, igniting a burning desire in his wake. I struggle to maintain composure as he speaks, his words dripping with a potent mixture of command and longing.

"If I remember correctly," he murmurs, his voice low and seductive, "I told you to come to my room once you are done and not to disappear again." I glance upwards, silently pleading with the heavens to intervene and save me from whatever game Nickolas is playing right now and to shield us from Eric and Lily. I'm thankful that the dim light from the TV casts shadows, offering us a semblance of privacy. "Didn't I, Amelia?" His words snap me out of my reverie, his hand now gently but possessively wrapping around my neck, not restricting, but claiming me in his grasp.

"You did," I whisper, feeling my legs tremble from the lingering sensation of his touch.

"I did," he affirms, his hand gliding from my waist down my leg, his touch deliberate and tantalizing. With a slow, deliberate movement, he uncrosses my legs before returning his hand between them.

I gasp, my fingers instinctively clutching the armrest as Nickolas's touch sends a surge of sensation coursing through me. As he slowly moves my G-string to the side, my breath catches in my throat, a mixture of surprise and arousal swirling within me. I was also surprised it wasn’t grandma panties they bought for me.

Returning to reality with a sharp intake of breath, I feel the intensity of Nickolas's touch as he strokes my center, each caress sending waves of pleasure rippling through me. My body responds eagerly, aching with need as wetness pools between my legs. Confusion and desire battle within me as I try to comprehend the whirlwind of sensations engulfing me. What the fuck is going on?

My mind races with questions, but in this moment, all I can focus on is the intoxicating touch of Nickolas's finger and the raw, primal desire building within me.

"I thought about giving you a light punishment for disobeying me, but then you decided to make things worse," Nickolas murmurs, his voice sending a jolt of electricity through me as he inserts a finger into me. My lips press together tightly as I grip the armrest with increasing desperation.

What on earth is Nickolas doing? Is he truly going to touch me in front of Eric and Lily? And why am I not protesting? My mind whirls with confusion, even as my body responds eagerly to his touch. I'm not entirely sure what I've done to deserve this, but in this moment, it hardly seems to matter. "I'm sorry," I manage to say, the words emerging as a strained whisper instead of the moan that threatens to escape. Despite the confusion swirling within me, I can't deny the primal longing building with each stroke of his finger.

"Don't worry, once I'm done with you, you will be sorry," he says, his voice a low growl as he adds another finger into me and increases the pressure around my neck. I throw my head back, my back arching as pleasure surges through me, intensified by the sensation of his hand around my neck.

"Nickolas," I rasp out, my voice barely audible amidst the overwhelming waves of ecstasy crashing over me as he slowly thrusts in and out of me. Every fiber of my being screams that this is wrong, but it feels so undeniably good.

"Be careful, little one," he warns, his tone dripping with both menace and desire, "you don't want your friends hearing you, do you?" He slows his pace, torturing me with his deliberate movements, pushing me to the edge of my restraint.

I shake my head frantically, unable to form words, as I fear that if I open my mouth, only a desperate moan will escape. Nickolas continues to slowly thrust in and out of me, his hand still wrapped around my neck, heightening my pleasure with each deliberate movement. As the pleasure builds and threatens to overwhelm me completely, I bite down hard on my lip, digging my nails into the armrest in a futile attempt to stifle the inevitable moan ripping to escape.

"I'm coming, Nickolas," I whisper, my voice trembling with need as I close my eyes, feeling the sensation roll to the back of my head.

"Good," he murmurs, his lips brushing against the back of my ear before suddenly pulling his hand away. My eyes snap open, confusion clouding my thoughts as I wonder why he stopped. Turning to face him, I see him licking his fingers clean, a mischievous glint dancing in his eyes.

A sinking realization dawn upon me. This must be Nickolas's way of exacting punishment, denying me the release I craved. Shock washes over me, both at the unexpected interruption and at the unfamiliar sight of mischief in Nickolas's eyes. I had never thought I would see any emotion other than anger or emptiness reflected in his gaze. Instinctively, my fingers reach out, craving to sweep aside his hair, to trace the contours of his face, to delve into the depths of his captivating eyes. But before my touch finds its mark, Nickolas springs up, intercepting my motion. A surge of relief washes over me because I dread to think what might have happened if I had actually touched him. I might have risked losing my hand.

My thighs press together involuntarily as I feel the unmistakable moisture between them. Lily returns and shoots me a sly wink, leaving me puzzled. I'm certain she and Eric couldn't have heard me. Then it dawns on me. Shit! How could I have been so careless? Werewolves possess senses far beyond the ordinary; they can detect arousal as easily as they draw breath. How could I forget what my kind are capable of?

My cheeks blaze bright red, and I quickly turn away from Lily, burying my face in Nickolas's chest. He readily accommodates me, wrapping his arm around my body. I've never felt more embarrassed in my life than I do in this moment. I also notice that his shirt is now untucked, likely an attempt to conceal the damp patch on his pants caused by my arousal.

"It was nice having you over for dinner, Your Majesty." Lily's voice breaks the tense silence. Nickolas doesn’t say anything, so I assume he nods. He stands and gently drops me on the floor. I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks as I avoid meeting Eric and Lily's eyes.

Nickolas leads the way to the front door, his hand firmly clasping mine. As we step out of their door, the thought crosses my mind: what did I do to deserve punishment? I'd love to ask him as we walk back to the castle in complete silence, but I know better than to do so.

We step into the castle's grand foyer, and the imposing figure of

Lord Easterlin emerges from the shadows. What is he doing here so late?

"Your Majesty, you finally return." Lord Easterlin's voice resonates through the cavernous space, a mixture of relief and urgency coloring his words as he strides purposefully toward Nickolas.

"Callum, what brings you here at this late hour?" Nickolas inquires, his tone measured yet tinged with a hint of curiosity.

"I have news of my daughter's whereabouts, Your Majesty, and I couldn't wait until morning to share it with you." Lord Easterlin's words send a jolt of shock through me.

Why were they looking for Ember? Did something happen that I didn't know about?

“Really?” Nickolas asks, excitement in his voice from Lord Easterlin’s news. A sense of betrayal claws at my insides, cutting deeper than any wound I've ever known. He expresses an emotion I never thought I would see him show, yet here it is, plain as day, etched across his features. All because of Ember—the woman who inflicted upon me such profound pain, nearly to the point of death.

The fragile threads of trust I had begun to weave toward Nickolas unravel in an instant, replaced by a seething anger that courses through my veins like wildfire. Tears threaten to spill from my eyes as my blood boils with rage.

"As we speak, Your Majesty, my men are bringing her back this instant," Lord Easterlin adds, and that’s it. With a frustrated huff, I turn to walk away, but Nickolas's hand clasps onto mine, stopping me in my tracks. His brows furrow in confusion as he takes in the tears welling in my eyes, but Lord Easterlin pulls his attention away before he can question me about it.

“Your Majesty,” Lord Easterlin calls, waiting for a reply.

“That’s good to hear, Callum,” Nickolas says, placing his other hand on Lord Easterlin's shoulders. "I doubted trusting you with finding your daughter because of what will happen to her if she returns, but I'm glad you proved me wrong."

I tug my hand out of his grasp, desperate to free myself from the suffocating grip of this emotional torture, but I halt at Lord Easterlin’s words.

“My daughter has brought shame to my family by disobeying the crown. The only way we can right this wrong is with her head, and I shall give it to you.” Lord Easterlin’s words land like a blow,

leaving me frozen in my spot, utterly speechless.

Did I misunderstand Nickolas? I never told him Ember kidnapped me, so the last thing I would deduce from their conversation was that they were looking to kill her, not wed her. Besides, Lord Easterlin is the one reporting news about her whereabouts. My first thought wouldn't be that he was delivering his daughter on a silver plate. The very idea of him orchestrating his own daughter's execution sent a chill down my spine, shattering any illusions of familial loyalty or compassion.

"Good to hear, Callum. I will be expecting your daughter on her knees in chains tomorrow in the throne room," Nickolas states firmly, squeezing Lord Easterlin's shoulder before guiding me away.

As we ascend to my room, I find myself unable to tear my gaze away from Nickolas, my mind still reeling from the unexpected turn of events. I'm shocked to the core that he's taking steps to ensure justice for me. It's a gesture I never anticipated, and I'm left wondering what prompted him to act on my behalf. It certainly isn't out of guilt for what happened to me, so what could it be? The question lingers, unanswered, as we reach my room.

Once inside, Nickolas cups my face in his palm, his eyes searching mine for any sign of distress. "Why were you crying? Did I hurt you earlier?" he asks, genuine concern etched into his features. I shake my head, unable to find the words to speak with the tangled mess of emotions swirling within me. "Are you sure?" Nickolas presses, his gaze unwavering as he searches my eyes for any hint of deception. I nod, mustering a weak smile to reassure him.

"I'm fine," I murmur, hoping he'll drop it. There's a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions raging inside me, and as much as it feels like cowardice, I'm not ready to confront them just yet. I just want to head to bed and sleep.

"Alright, sleep well. Go to bed," he relents, finally releasing his gentle hold on my face.

I collapse onto my bed, burying my face into the sheets, muffling the frustrated noises that escape me. Why couldn't my life be simple? One minute, I'm nursing a broken heart, convinced that he's betrayed me. And the next, I'm thrown into a whirlwind of confusion by his actions. It's enough to make me want to scream into my pillow in frustration. Why do things between us have to be so complicated?

With a heavy sigh, I drag myself up and head for the shower, hoping the warm water will wash away some of the turmoil raging inside me. But even as I slip beneath the comforting spray, my thoughts remain fixated on Nickolas and the changes I've observed in him. I can't help but wonder what they mean and why they keep happening.

As I finally crawl back into bed, I know sleep will be elusive tonight. My mind is too busy turning over with possibilities, the uncertainties of what lies ahead. Eventually, I drift into a restless slumber.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

NICKOLAS

I twirl my bourbon glass, captivated by the intricate dance of ice cubes within, each movement offering a temporary respite from the weight of reality pressing down on me. Shifting my gaze upwards, I observe Amelia sleeping soundly in her bed a few feet away. Her golden locks cascade over the pillow, and a subtle pout graces her lips, an endearing sight that unexpectedly tugs at my heartstrings.

Images flash through my mind with vivid intensity, relentless and unyielding. I envision my hands entwined in her hair, gripping it with a fervor matching the intensity of my desire. The thought of her lips wrapped around my hard-on ignites a surge of arousal coursing through me. I moisten my lips, hoping the bourbon hasn't dulled the taste of her juices lingering on them.

I hadn’t intended to punish her at Eric’s, but seeing her moving to sit next to him after spending the whole dinner like they were a couple on a date, I lost it. Logically, I know there's no threat from Eric; he's mated to Lily, and he will never be with Amelia even if he didn’t find her, but I can’t fucking help it. Her easy banter with him, the effortless way she smiles and laughs, causes my fucking heart to feel like a thousand needles pierced it. The overwhelming desire to be the sole source of her joy, to see her smile and laugh only for me, is almost unbearable. It takes every ounce of restraint not to demand it of her.

Seeing her smile so genuinely, especially in Eric's presence, caught me off guard. It was as if I was witnessing a side of her I had never seen before, one that others seem to easily bring out. It made me realize that the version of her I've come to know may not be the

same as the one others see. In that moment, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was somehow missing out, like I had drawn the short straw. I yearn to experience that side of her, to understand what it is about others that brings out such warmth and happiness in her. But why this desire consumes me, I couldn't fucking begin to fathom.

I had planned to punish her when we returned to the castle, but my impatience got the best of me. She disobeyed my direct order to wait in my room after freshening up, and her behavior with Eric during dinner only fueled my frustration. I'm glad I didn't wait. Making her almost climax at Eric's place was the perfect punishment. Yet, if I'm honest with myself, there's another reason behind why I couldn't keep my hand off her. Images of her moaning and calling out to me last night have haunted my thoughts all day.

My dick pulses in my pants at the memory. It took every ounce of self-control not to bury my dick deep inside her and make her cum multiple times. The temptation was nearly overwhelming. I'm so fucking relieved she dozed off once I was finished with her last night, as I'm not sure I could have resisted otherwise. The scent of her mixed with her cum almost undid me the previous night. I didn't even know the mate bond was that fucking strong, but a part of me feels it might not be the sole reason I want her. The bond draws me to her, but I believe I would still crave Amelia just as intensely, even without it.

I take a sip of my drink, the familiar burn of alcohol momentarily distracting me from the other thoughts swirling in my mind, like how tomorrow is my mother's death anniversary. Centuries may have passed since her passing, but the pain still feels fresh, as though it happened just yesterday. The memory of her being taken from me cuts deep, a wound that time has failed to fully heal.

My grip tightens around the glass, knuckles straining against the pressure, as the image of the monster responsible for taking her away flashes vividly in my mind. Anguish surges through me, threatening to crush me under its weight, and I feel the glass buckle beneath my grasp. I glance toward the bed, and in an instant, the glass shatters into a million pieces, jolting Amelia awake. She quickly fumbles for the bedside lamp, casting the room into light as she scans the surroundings, her baby blue eyes wide with alarm.

Her baby blue eyes land on me, and it takes a moment for her to recognize who I am. When she does, her eyes slowly return to their

normal size, but I can still sense the wariness and fear in them. She gets out of bed, and her cautious steps toward me betray the distrust she has toward me.

“Your Majesty,” she says, keeping her gaze fixed on me with a mixture of curiosity and trepidation.

As I gaze at her, I can't help but be reminded of that bitch Jane. The same features, the same demeanor—and yet now, as I stare at her, I see Amelia only, not Jane. I hate that bitch Jane with every fiber of my being. The mere mention of her name in my head has my blood boiling, and I have to clench my fists hard to control my anger. I couldn't even believe that Amelia standing before me was related to Jane in any way.

“Go back to sleep, Amelia,” I growl, the words harsh against the backdrop of my turmoil. I reach for the bottle of bourbon I brought with me and take a long, hard sip straight from it, the burn providing a temporary distraction from the chaos swirling inside my mind.

“You're bleeding, Your Majesty. Do you need help?" Amelia's voice is laced with concern as she moves closer, attempting to grab my hand that was staining the floor crimson. I quickly pull it away before she can make contact. The cuts I sustained from shattering the glass earlier refuse to heal at the speed they should. It's no surprise, though, considering I still have traces of oak tree venom coursing through my system. Oaktree Venom is the dreaded kryptonite for vampires.

The treacherous vampires I killed the other night indeed did a number on me before I brutally tore their heads from their bodies and drenched myself in their warm, crimson blood. It still mystified me how they had obtained Oak tree venom and actually dared to use it against me, but the unanswered questions would have to wait for another time.

"Go back to sleep, Amelia," I instruct, rising from the couch in her room with the intention of leaving.

"Your Majesty," Amelia's voice stops me in my tracks, prompting me to pause on my way to the door. I hear her soft footsteps drawing closer, and what happens next catches me completely off guard. Amelia seizes my arms without warning and whirls me around, her actions bold and unexpected. Her petite hands find their way to my face, cradling it gently as she gazes up at me, dwarfed by my towering stature.

Instinctively, I raise my hand to push hers away, but something in her eyes gives me pause. In that moment, as she locks eyes with me, an unmistakable look of pity is reflected in her gaze. My hand hesitates, frozen in mid-air, as I find myself unable to tear my gaze away from hers. The intensity of her stare sends a shiver down my spine, and for the first time, I feel a flicker of vulnerability creeping into my heart.

"Is something wrong?" Amelia's voice breaks through the tense silence, her question only adding to the audacity of her actions tonight. I'm left speechless, taken aback by her daring to question me, though another reason keeps me silent.

I wait for it, that familiar sensation that always accompanies a woman's touch, but to my astonishment, it never comes. Amelia's hand continues to rest against my cheeks, imparting warmth that should have been impossible for anyone, even her—my mate. Panic grips me, seizing control of my senses as I instinctively wrap my hands around her neck, driving her back against the nearest wall with force. My grip tightens, fingers digging into her delicate skin as I slowly begin to choke the life out of her.

"I warned you never to touch me, didn't I?"

"I'm sorry," she manages to choke out, her face flushing red as my grip tightens around her neck.

"I will only repeat myself once. Don't. Ever. Fucking. Touch. Me. Again," I growl, the words laced with an icy finality. With a swift motion, I release my hold, causing her to crumple to the floor with a resounding thud. She coughs violently, her hand instinctively reaching up to rub her bruised throat.

"I'm sorry," she whispers again, her voice trembling as she meets my gaze with those captivating baby blue eyes, now brimming with tears. My heart constricts painfully in my chest, a tumultuous mix of emotions threatening to overwhelm me. Ignoring the stirring in my heart, I turn on my heel and exit her room before I can make matters worse.

"What the fuck is wrong with me?" I scream, my fists colliding with the wall of my room in a fit of frustration. The image of her tear-filled eyes flashes in my mind, haunting me even as I try to push it away.

I need to shower and get some rest, I remind myself, attempting to shove aside the tangled mess of emotions that threaten to consume me. With a heavy sigh, I trudge toward the bathroom,

hoping that the water will wash away not only the grime of the day but also the unsettling thoughts that plague my mind.

AMELIA

I lie on my back, staring up at the ceiling and counting the crystals on my chandelier for the tenth time since morning. Despite waking up hours ago, I lack the motivation to get out of bed, feeling utterly drained before even starting my day. Maybe it’s because what happened last night knocked some reality into me and has me pondering over them.

My hand drifts unconsciously to my neck, the memory of what transpired replaying in my mind. The bruise from Nickolas's grip has likely faded by now, but the sting of his actions lingers. I berate myself for my foolishness, for daring to touch him despite knowing how rigid he is about personal boundaries. It was foolish of me to reach out to him to inquire about his troubles. Even if he hadn't reacted violently, I doubt he would have confided in me. I'm such a fool at times, but I can't entirely blame myself.

The sight of him, reeking of alcohol with a bleeding hand, stirred something within me—a desperate urge to comfort and assist him. It drove me to take bold actions last night, actions I now regret as I remember my rightful place. I'm relieved I didn't compound my mistakes by questioning him further about why he was drinking in the dark in my room. I shudder to think what his reaction might have been had I dared.

The growl of my stomach breaks me from my reverie, a reminder that I can't wallow in bed indefinitely. With a sigh, I throw off the covers and make my way to the bathroom, resolving to freshen up and face whatever challenges the day may bring.

I step out of my room, feeling a sense of relief wash over me as I find Beatrice standing at my door, her warm smile instantly putting me at ease. Without hesitation, I rush into her open arms, embracing her tightly. She's become the closest thing I have to a mother now, especially since mine might be dead. Despite her initial aloofness when we first met, our relationship has since evolved into one of warmth and affection.

"How are you doing, child?" Beatrice inquires, pulling away slightly to assess my well-being.

"I'm good," I reply, returning her smile, genuinely happy to see her.

"And your wolf?" she probes further.

"Great."

"That's good, but you still need to shift soon. I will speak to the king about it again."

"Don't bother," I interject, knowing all too well that after last night's events, Nickolas would never allow it, even without it. Beatrice is about to respond when the door next to mine creaks open, and the devil himself emerges.

I freeze, my gaze locked on Nickolas as he surveys Beatrice and me with an unreadable expression. Dressed in a sleek black suit that accentuates his imposing figure, he exudes an air of power and authority. His eyes flicker briefly from my face to my neck, where his handprint had left its mark just hours before. But now, there's no trace of his actions, no visible evidence of the chokehold he had on me last night. Yet, his intense scrutiny feels like he can still see the remnants of his grip.

I lift my gaze to meet Nickolas's, my brows furrowing in confusion as I take in the bags under his eyes. It's evident he hasn't slept a wink last night, and I can't help but wonder why. A pang of concern tugs at my heart, threatening to push me to ask him once more if everything is alright. But then I remember my place, the boundaries he's set, and the consequences of crossing them.

I bite my lip, holding back the instinctive urge to voice my concern. Our relationship may be strained and fraught with tension, but he's still my mate. And despite everything, a part of me will always care about his well-being, no matter how much I try to deny it.

Nickolas clears his throat, breaking the tense silence between us, and turns his attention to Beatrice. "Is it possible for the earth-binding spell to work while she’s in wolf form?" he inquires, his tone clipped and businesslike. Beatrice's eyes light up with excitement at the prospect, and she nods eagerly.

"It's even stronger then," she confirms, a hint of anticipation in her voice.

My heart skips a beat at their exchange, a glimmer of hope flickering to life within me. Could Nickolas be considering allowing me to shift after all? I turn to him, eyes wide with astonishment, scarcely daring to believe it.

"Once you've had dinner, come to my room. If you don't see me there, check my office," he instructs me, his words laced with a rare

sense of warmth.

"Okay," I reply, unable to contain the smile that spreads across my face. Though he doesn't explicitly say it, I know why he's requesting to see me later, and a surge of gratitude floods through me.

Turning to Beatrice, I envelop her in a tight hug, overcome with emotion at the possibility of finally being able to shift again after so long. Tears of joy blur my vision, and I hastily wipe them away, unable to contain my happiness.

"Thank you," I whisper, my voice trembling with emotion.

"You're welcome, dear," Beatrice replies, returning my smile as she interlocks our arms together and leads us toward the stairs.

We make our way downstairs to the kitchen, where the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and sizzling bacon greets us. As we sit down to breakfast, I can't shake the nagging curiosity that has been gnawing at me since last night. Unable to contain my curiosity any longer, I turn to Beatrice and broach the subject that has been on my mind.

"Why doesn't Nickolas like to be touched?" I inquire, my curiosity piqued. Beatrice pauses mid-sip, setting her coffee cup down with a thoughtful expression.

"Because he doesn't like to be touched," she responds simply, avoiding my gaze.

I narrow my eyes at her, sensing there's more to the story than she's letting on. "Because he doesn't want to be touched. Really?" I press, expecting a more substantial explanation.

"Yes," Beatrice replies evasively, still avoiding eye contact. It's clear she knows the reason but is reluctant to divulge it to me. I can sense there's a deeper, more serious reason behind Nickolas's aversion to touch.

"Can you give me a clue?" I prod further, hoping to glean some insight into why.

"If the king wanted you to know why he doesn't like to be touched, he will tell you himself," Beatrice asserts firmly, her tone leaving no room for argument. I pause, taken aback by her stern demeanor.

"Wow, Beatrice, and here I thought we were friends," I jest half-heartedly, though I know she's serious.

"We are, and that's why I'm going to tell you this. Never, I mean never, bring it up with the king. If you value your life, that is,"

Beatrice warns, her words carrying a weight of caution.

"Whoa, I didn't know it was such a dangerous question," I remark, my curiosity now tinged with a sense of trepidation.

"One thing the king hates more than Jane is being asked questions about his past," Beatrice divulges, her slip revealing more than she intended. It's clear that whatever happened in Nickolas's past is a sensitive subject, one that he guards fiercely.

"Why does the king hate his stepmother?" I inquire, changing the subject slightly to ease the tension. I know that Jane, the late queen of vampires, isn't Nickolas's biological mother, which is why we aren't related.

"Another story the king will tell you himself if he wishes you to know," Beatrice replies cryptically, her tone leaving no room for further discussion.

"Hmm...alright," I concede, though internally, my determination to uncover the truth only grows stronger. Beatrice's warning has only fueled my curiosity further, and I'm more determined than ever to uncover the secrets of Nickolas's past, no matter the cost.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I kiss Beatrice goodbye as we prepare to part ways. She mentions she's headed to the flower shop to pick up flowers for Nickolas's mom before visiting her grave. I hadn't realized it was the anniversary of his mother's death. I inquire about Nickolas's mom, and Beatrice doesn't hesitate to share. She reveals that Nickolas's mother, Holly, was a human sex slave who was adored by Nickolas's father. Beatrice explains that Holly vanished for a time, and eighteen years later, Nickolas was brought to the castle by Leo, who was searching for his mate worldwide. It's speculated that Holly may have realized the dangers of being pregnant before Jane and escaped to her home in England. This revelation sheds light on why Nickolas has a British accent.

As much as I consider accompanying Beatrice to visit Holly's grave, I ultimately decide against it. Nickolas and I share no semblance of a relationship. He would probably throw a fit if he saw me visiting his mother's grave. Moreover, the constraints of the earth-binding spell restrict my movements, preventing me from straying too far without triggering its effects, and Holly's grave lies beyond that boundary. Instead, I ask Beatrice to search for me upon her return before setting off toward Eric's house. I'm so happy his house is within the distance I can walk.

Upon arrival, I knock lightly on Eric's door, waiting patiently for either him or Lily to answer. It's Lily who greets me with a warm smile, ushering me inside their home and inviting me to take a seat in the living room while she prepares a drink for me.

"Thank you," I murmur gratefully as I accept the glass of Chardonnay she pours for me. The cool liquid feels refreshing

against my lips, and for a moment, I allow myself to savor the taste, wondering if it's even permissible for me to indulge in alcohol anymore.

Lily settles into the seat opposite mine, her expression curious as she gazes at me over the rim of her own glass, which she promptly fills before speaking.

"Not that I'm complaining, but to what do I owe this visit today?" she inquires, her tone light yet tinged with curiosity.

"I came to speak to you about your parents. Have you been able to contact them recently?" I inquire, getting straight to the point.

Lily's expression softens with concern, and she shakes her head. "No, but I plan to do so soon."

"How?" I press, genuinely curious about her strategy.

"Eric still doesn't know we're cousins, so he's allowing me to go look for them under the impression that I miss my family and want to let them know I'm safe after being kidnapped," Lily explains. A flicker of concern crosses my mind at her words.

"Won't that put them in danger if he sees them? I can bet he knows how Uncle Liam looks. And if he didn't, his striking resemblance to Dad is enough for him to put things together." Lily nods, acknowledging the validity of my concerns.

"I thought of that and already have a plan on how to handle that," she assures me confidently.

"Which is?"

"As I said, Eric is allowing me to go to werewolf territory to look for them. I already have a perfect idea of where my family might be hiding. Once Eric and I are close to that location, I'll pick a night and sneak out to meet them," Lily explains.

"That's a perfect plan."

"Yeah. Once I meet them, I'll find out how Uncle Nate and everyone else are doing. I'm sure my dad must be in contact with them."

"He probably is," I agree, feeling a surge of hope at the prospect of finally knowing how my family is faring. I silently pray that Lily's plan will be successful.

"Don't worry, Amelia, we are the royal werewolf family. It would take more to get rid of us," Lily reassures me, giving my hand a warm squeeze.

"Yeah, it would," I reply, though a part of me can't shake the nagging worry about my family's well-being. I can't help but

wonder why they haven't come to rescue me yet. Though I don't wish them to fall into Nickolas's trap, I can't shake the fear that their absence might signify something far worse. My family would never abandon me, and I cling to the hope that they are safe and sound, far from Nickolas's clutches.

•••

The remaining of the day slips away in a blur of wine and conversation with Lily, the alcohol serving as a temporary escape from the tangled mess of my life. But as the evening wears on, the effects of the alcohol catch up to me, and I find myself succumbing to a drunken stupor, passing out on her couch.

I awaken to darkness enveloping the room, the realization dawning on me that I've slept far longer than intended. Eric's voice breaks through my groggy haze, urging me to brush my teeth before heading home to avoid Nickolas's wrath should he catch wind of the alcohol on my breath. Guilt prickles at my conscience as I hastily comply with his request, berating myself for my lack of self-control.

Rushing out of their home, I quicken my pace, anxiety gnawing at my insides as I realize I'm running late to meet Nickolas. I hope he hasn't changed his mind.

As I walk back toward the castle, a sense of unease settles over me, a prickling sensation at the back of my neck as if someone's gaze is boring into me. I glance over my shoulder, but there's no one in sight, no discernible presence lurking in the shadows. Chalking it up to paranoia induced by the alcohol and the chill of the night air, I push forward, determined to reach the castle before it’s too late.

My heart lurches in my chest as I come to an unexpected halt, my eyes widening in disbelief as I lock gazes with Ember and Adam, standing just a few feet in front of me. The color drains from my face as a wave of fear washes over me, paralyzing me in place.

"Hello, princess," they say in unison, their voices sending shivers down my spine. I begin to slowly back away from them, my mind racing with a whirlwind of questions and confusion. Weren't they supposed to behead Ember this morning? What the hell happened? Did Nickolas go back on his word, or was there some other explanation?

Despite the multitude of questions swirling in my mind, now isn't the time to seek answers. With a surge of adrenaline, I quickly pivot

on my heels and sprint back the way I came, only to be met by the ominous sight of two vampires lurking in wait for me. Panic grips my chest as I realize they've anticipated my escape attempt.

Without hesitation, I veer off course and plunge into the surrounding woods, my footsteps pounding against the forest floor as I dart between the trees. I refuse to let them capture me again, not after what happened last time. The memory of Adam's sudden appearance that day spurs me onward, driving me to do everything in my power to prevent history from repeating itself.

"Come back here, you bitch!" Ember's enraged voice echoes behind me as she gives chase, her footsteps closing in fast. I grit my teeth, forcing myself to focus on the path ahead and resist the urge to glance back. Every wasted second could mean the difference between escape and capture.

I push my human legs to their limits, the branches and underbrush whipping past me in a blur as I race through the woods. Though the temptation to shift into my wolf form tugs at me, I know the risks outweigh the benefits. Shifting would only make me easier to track, and I can't afford to take that chance.

As I continue my desperate flight through the woods, the thought of unmasking my scent to throw off my pursuers crosses my mind. However, the memory of the spell Nickolas cast to stop my heart should I unmask gives me pause. I can't afford to take the risk of checking if it was still there, especially now with danger hot on my heels.

With a heavy heart, I resign myself to maintaining my human form despite the inherent disadvantages it presents in terms of speed and agility. Though it's far from ideal, it's the safest option available to me at the moment.

I press on, my lungs burning and my legs aching from exertion. I cling to the hope that I can outmaneuver Ember and Adam. Determined to avoid getting kidnapped at all costs.

I recoil from the smell of him, his foul breath assaulting my senses as he tackles me to the ground. Adam wastes no time in getting to his feet, dragging me up with him by my hair.

"You thought you could run away, didn't you, bitch?" he snarls into my ear, his grip on my hair tightening. Despite his aggression, I try to ignore him and focus on connecting with Marie. It's been a while since we last shifted, so it's taking longer than usual, especially considering she's still sobering up. My concentration

shatters as a sharp slap across my face, slicing open my bottom lip. A sting of pain shoots through my lip.

"You stupid bitch. I can't believe you made me fucking run," Ember snaps, panting as she stands before Adam and me. I feel fury coursing through me, urging me to strike back at her. But I resist the urge, knowing it will only escalate the situation further and distract me from my current task. Right now, I need to stay focused. "Look at me when I'm fucking talking to you, bitch!" Ember's growl reverberates through the air as she grabs my chin, her nails digging into my skin. I bite down on my bruised lip to stifle the pain, shooting her a glare for a moment before deliberately ignoring her presence, focusing instead on reconnecting with Marie. I'll deal with her later, once I have the chance.

"I suggest we kill her now and be done with it," Adam suggests, his hand trailing across my face, sending shivers of disgust down my spine.

"No, she needs to suffer more before she dies," Ember counters, her voice dripping with malice.

Adam and Ember begin to bicker over my fate. I seize the opportunity and deliver a swift kick to Adam's balls. He recoils in pain, releasing his grip on my hair as I make a desperate bid for freedom. But my escape is short-lived. Before I can get more than a few steps away, something tackles me to the ground with brutal force. Agony courses through me as Adam stands over me, seething with rage.

"You fucking bitch!" he snarls, delivering a vicious kick to my abdomen. I curl into a ball, clutching my stomach in pain as he continues his onslaught. "To think I wanted to give you a quick death," Adam sneers, his words dripping with malice as he delivers another round of merciless blows. The pain is unbearable, but it's not what has me screaming at the top of my lungs. Ember digs her heels into my thighs, and a searing pain shoots through me, eliciting an agonized cry, and blood pours out.

"I told you the bitch doesn't deserve the easy way out." Ember's cruel words cut through the air, punctuated by another wave of pain as she withdraws her heels from my thighs. I can feel warm blood oozing from the wounds, adding to the agony that already courses through my battered body.

Adam grabs me by the hair and begins to drag me across the ground. Fresh wounds open up on my skin, tearing open with each

sharp object we pass. With tears filling my eyes, I push past the agony and desperation, reaching out with all my strength in a final attempt to connect with Marie. But as the moments tick by, it becomes increasingly clear that my efforts are in vain. Gosh! I feel like I'm fourteen all over and trying to shift for the first time, and even then, it wasn't as hard as this.

“Marie, if you can hear me, shit, shift. I need you to shift right now,” I plead with her, tears streaming down my face as Adam continues to drag me mercilessly across the harsh ground.

Marie might have emerged from her coma, but to my dismay, the part of my brain responsible for controlling shifting remained inactive. It was a baffling and frustrating situation. The prolonged trauma and coma seemed to have rendered that part of my brain dormant. Now, I faced the daunting task of forcing it awake.

The castle fades from view with each passing second, and a sense of desperation grips me. I realize that I can no longer rely on shifting to gain the upper hand in this situation. It's time to change course and take a different approach.

With a deep breath, I make a split-second decision to unmask my scent, knowing full well the risks involved. If I fail to escape, Ember will exploit me, but I can't afford to be captured again. I've endured enough suffering already.

As I slowly unmask my scent, something unexpected happens. Tears of joy fill my eyes as I realize I might not need to do. Despite the odds and danger, I've managed to awaken the dormant part of my brain responsible for shifting. “Hello, Amelia, I believe we have some heads to chop off, Marie's voice echoes in my mind as my body slowly shifts into my wolf form. With each passing moment, the pain and fear begin to fade, replaced by a primal sense of power and determination.

As my transformation completes, Adam releases his grip on my hair, his eyes widening in fear at the sight of the wolf before him. It's a foolish mistake on their part not to have injected me with silver as soon as they captured me. With a loud growl, I bare my teeth in a wolfish grin, relishing the fear in Adam's eyes. "Let's begin," we say in unison before launching ourselves at Adam with ferocious determination.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

With a ferocious leap, I pounce on Adam, bringing him crashing to the ground beneath me. Ignoring his screams of pain, I sink my teeth into his shoulder blades, tearing through flesh and muscle with relentless force. His cries grow louder, his pleas for mercy falling on deaf ears as I continue to savage him without remorse.

Adam's screams reach a fever pitch as I bite down harder, determined to inflict as much damage as possible. With a savage twist, I rip his arm from his body, blood gushing from the wound and splattering across my fur.

A grin spreads across my muzzle as I gaze down at my handiwork, relishing in the sight of Adam's blood staining my claws and coating my face. But I'm far from finished. With a predatory gleam in my eyes, I prepare to unleash further torment upon him, tearing him limb from limb until he's nothing but a broken shell of a man, begging for the mercy he'll never receive.

Adam bolts, which is something I expected. Adrenaline surges through me. Nothing is sweeter than hunting down your prey, my blood sings. I spring after him on powerful haunches, the forest floor blurring beneath my swift paws.

Closing in, I see the whites of Adam's panicked eyes as he glances back. Fear rolls off him in waves, spurring me on. I bare my teeth in anticipation, muscles coiling to pounce. But as I leap, something unexpected happens.

Suddenly, a gunshot cracks through the air. The bullet pierces my shoulder in a burst of agonizing pain, hot blood matting my fur. I hit the ground hard, the impact knocking the breath from my lungs. Through the haze, I see Ember holding the smoking rifle, her

eyes wide with fear yet resolve.

That explains where she disappeared to once I transitioned. She went to retrieve the gun, too timid to face me without an extra hand.

“You stupid bitch! You thought you could fucking kill me!” He grabs the gun from Ember and fires it. He aims it unsteadily, hatred twisting his face. I narrowly dodge the bullet as it whizzes past my left paw.

Snarling in defiance, I prepare to attack him. Once I disarm him, he’ll be powerless again. With a swift leap, I try to pull Adam to the ground. I succeed, but not without taking a bullet to the chest. The pain is excruciating as the silver bullet lodges into my ribcage, dangerously close to my heart. A tortured howl escapes me as I crash down, the forest spinning around me. Dark blood gushes from the wound.

"Get the chains ready!" Ember's shrill cry cuts through my agony.

No! I can't be captured again. Gathering my fading strength, I stagger upright, every labored breath bringing fresh torture. I'll fight to my last breath before letting myself get kidnapped.

"I can see you have a death wish," Adam sneers, the rifle aimed at my heart. "Let me help you with that."

As he fires, I desperately lurch aside, the bullet narrowly missing. But suddenly, white-hot pain erupts in my left paw as another shot rings out—Ember has flanked me. Her bullet shreds flesh and bone, and I collapse with a wounded howl, crimson staining the forest floor.

I turn to face Adam, my snarl tinged with regret for ripping his arm off his body instead of his head. With each breath, I feel my strength waning, the loss of blood taking its toll on my weary body. I survey my surroundings, seeking a path forward despite the overwhelming odds stacked against me.

Adam and Ember stand before me, armed and dangerous, their guns poised to strike at any movement I make. I know I must act quickly and decisively if I am to have any hope of escaping. My gaze settles on Adam, his form offering a tantalizingly vulnerable target compared to Ember's more formidable presence.

With a surge of determination, I move to attack Adam, only to find my movements impeded by the cold bite of silver chains wrapped tightly around my paws. Panic surges through me as I struggle against the chains, their burning touch searing my fur and

sending waves of agony coursing through my body.

Desperation claws at my mind as I frantically seek a way to break free from my restraints, but each tug only serves to tighten the chains around me, locking me in place with merciless efficiency. I whimper in pain as the chains dig into my flesh, leaving deep wounds that bleed freely onto the ground below.

Suddenly, a searing pain lances through my back, and I cry out in anguish as a whip crack against my skin, leaving behind a trail of charred fur and raw, exposed flesh. Again and again, the whip strikes, each blow driving me further into the depths of agony until I can bear it no longer. With a final whimper, I collapse to the ground, my strength drained by the relentless assault.

Adam moves toward me, a grin on his face, blood seeping from his shoulder where Ember has tied a scarf to stop the bleeding. He bends down and lifts my wolf chin, his touch sending waves of revulsion coursing through me. I can barely contain the urge to strike out at him, to tear him limb from limb for the pain he has inflicted upon me, and tear that smile off his face.

“It was lovely knowing you, Amelia,” Adam taunts, his words dripping with venom as he raises his gun, preparing to deliver the final blow. I close my eyes, bracing for the inevitable, a silent prayer escaping my lips for my family, hoping they are alive and will avenge my death.

But instead of the deafening blast of the gun, I am greeted by the sound of a growl, low and menacing, echoing through the clearing. My eyes snap open in shock, and I gasp as I see Nickolas standing before me, his form radiating with an aura of raw rage.

In an instant, he is upon Adam, his hands wrapped around his throat, pinning him viciously against a tree.

“You shouldn’t have fucking touched what’s mine. Again!” Nickolas snarls at Adam. I watch in stunned silence as Nickolas unleashes his wrath upon Adam, his fury a force to be reckoned with.

I look around me, and Ember scrambles away in terror, fallen vampires lying motionless on the ground, their heads severed from their bodies in a grim testament to Nickolas’s wrath. What the fuck happened?

With a swift and merciless motion, Nickolas breaks Adam's other arm from his shoulders, the sickening sound of bone snapping filling the air. Adam's screams echo through the forest, his eyes

wide with terror.

But Nickolas is not finished yet. With a savage determination, he moves his hands between Adam's legs and rips out his manhood, the gruesome sight causing bile to rise in my throat. I can hardly bear to watch as blood gushes from the wound, pooling on the ground beneath him.

"You won't be needing that in hell," Nickolas taunts, flinging the severed balls aside with a callous disregard. Adam's screams reach a crescendo as he gazes in horror at his discarded manhood, his world collapsing around him.

But Nickolas is not content to let Adam suffer quietly. With cold and calculated precision, he takes up the gun and begins to methodically shoot Adam in the kneecaps, the sound of gunfire ringing through the clearing with each shot. I wince as Adam's cries of pain fill the air, the sound reverberating in my ears like a symphony of agony.

But Nickolas does not stop there. With a cruel twist of fate, he turns his attention to Adam's feet, shooting each toe in succession, the bullets tearing through flesh and bone with brutal efficiency. I can hardly bear to watch as Adam's screams of pain fill the air, his body wracked with agony as Nickolas delivers his torture with cold and ruthless precision.

“I love the way your feet look. Too bad you won’t have them in hell with you.” Nickolas digs his claws into Adam's shoulder, and the sound of rending flesh echoes through the night, mingling with Adam's anguished cries. Blood flows freely from Adam's wounds, painting the grass red. How was he still alive or not even passed out from the pain?

“Please kill me,” Adam rasps out, blood pouring from his mouth. His desperate pleas for death are met with only cold indifference from Nickolas, who seems to relish in his suffering.

“In due time, I will,” Nickolas says, and with chilling calmness, he wrenches Adam's leg from his knees. The sight of it is enough to make my stomach churn, but I force myself to bear witness to the horror unfolding before me. With each agonizing moment, I find myself drawn further into the vortex of violence and despair, unable to tear my gaze away from the nightmare unfolding before me.

“Please,” Adam pleads for release, his voice barely a whisper, but Nickolas shows no mercy. He continues his assault, tearing away Adam's other leg with ruthless efficiency. I can't bear to watch as

Adam's cries fill the air; each screams a testament to the unbearable agony he endures.

“Sure,” Nickolas says, and time seems to slow to a crawl as he carries out his ruthless act, his movements deliberate and methodical. I watch in horror as he digs his clawed finger into Adam's heart, each agonizing moment stretching on indefinitely.

Adam's pained cries fill the air, mingling with the sickening sound of flesh tearing and blood spilling. I'm frozen in place, the warmth of Adam's blood coating my fur like a dreadful reminder of the brutality unfolding before me.

When Nickolas flings his heart to the side and turns to face me, his entire being drenched in Adam's blood, I feel a chill run down my spine. His gaze pierces through me, devoid of any remorse or humanity. Slowly, he begins to approach. I remain rooted to the spot, unable to move or speak as Nickolas draws nearer. The stench of blood fills the air, thick and suffocating.

“Shift back,” Marie says, bringing me back to earth, and I comply, shifting back to my human form, but my body is weak and trembling, barely able to support my weight. Nickolas's strong arms catch me before I collapse. The silver bullet burns in my chest, my lifeblood spilling onto the forest floor.

I struggle to speak, my voice barely a whisper as I gaze up at him, my hand trembling as I reach out to touch his blood-splattered face. Despite the pain and exhaustion that courses through my veins, a sense of gratitude fills me as I look into his eyes, seeing the depth of his remorse mirrored there.

"Nickolas," I rasp, my voice barely audible over the sounds of the night. I feel the metallic tang of blood on my tongue as I cough, the bullet lodged in my ribcage sending waves of agony through my body.

"Amelia," he responds, his voice thick with emotion. I feel his hand trembling against mine, his concern evident in every line of his face.

"Thank you," I manage to say, my hand slipping from his face as darkness engulfs me.

"Amelia," Nickolas pleads, shaking my body gently. I struggle to keep my eyes open, the weight of exhaustion pulling me into the depths of unconsciousness.

"I feel tired," I murmur, my words barely coherent as I surrender to the darkness that beckons me. "I am going to sleep for a bit."

With those final words, I allow the darkness to claim me, the warmth of Nickolas's embrace the last thing I feel before succumbing to oblivion.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

NICKOLAS

My heart clenches as I hold Amelia's lifeless body close to my chest, her once warm skin now growing cold against mine. I shake her gently, calling out her name in desperation, but she remains unresponsive. I don’t waste another second and sprint toward the castle. My chest tightens at the thought of her never opening her eyes again, her beautiful blue eyes that draw me in without me even realizing.

Upon bursting into the castle, I waste no time commanding the guards to fetch Beatrice and bring her to Amelia's room without delay. With trembling hands, I lay Amelia's body gently on the bed, feeling a surge of helplessness wash over me as I watch her pale form against the sheets.

Beatrice arrives swiftly, her eyes widening in shock the moment they land on me. I've sustained some injuries while fighting—an arrow lodged in my shoulder that's not healing because it was coated with oak tree venom. But I'll be fine.

"Your Majesty," Beatrice exclaims, rushing toward me, but I stop her, pointing toward Amelia on the bed.

"I'm fine. Save her," I instruct firmly.

Beatrice walks toward the bed, tears filling her eyes as she sees Amelia. She immediately gets to work, drawing water from the bathroom and casting healing spells.

I turn away, facing my back to them, feeling the tension in my muscles every time I hear Amelia whimpering in pain. My heart aches with every sound. I resist the urge to command Beatrice to work faster, to bring back the light to Amelia's eyes.

I stand for a few more minutes before feeling Beatrice's hand on my shoulders.

"How is she?" I ask, turning to face her, my voice barely above a whisper. My heart pounds in my chest. Beatrice swallows hard and I see sorrow etched in her eyes. It sends a shiver down my spine.

"Tell me, Beatrice," I demand, my voice trembling with fear and desperation. I need to know the truth, even if it's the hardest thing to hear. The thought of losing Amelia is unbearable, but I still want to hear it before I believe it.

"Amelia has a lot of silver in her system," Beatrice begins, her voice heavy with emotion. "The only way to save her life would be to clean her blood of it, but unfortunately, we can't."

"Why?" I manage to choke out, my brows furrowing in confusion and frustration.

"We would need to drain her of almost all the blood in her system while pumping new blood into her," Beatrice explains.

"Then do it."

"We can't," Beatrice says, her voice barely audible now. "Amelia is a werewolf, and we don't have a blood match for her."

"Even me, that's her mate," I mutter, ignoring the weight of those words as they hit me. Beatrice's eyes widen in surprise as she stares at me, her expression a mix of shock and disbelief. It's a reaction I expected.

"Your Majesty…" Beatrice hesitates, still shocked by my willingness to offer Amelia my blood. Despite my initial reservations, I've come to realize that I can't let her die, especially now that so much has changed between us. The intense hatred I once felt toward her has softened, replaced by a complex mix of emotions that I can't quite define. I care more than I ever thought possible for someone I once despised. Perhaps I don't even hate her anymore.

"What do I need to do?"

"Nothing, just take a seat beside Amelia while I get everything ready," Beatrice says. She quickly leaves the room to gather the necessary supplies for the blood transfusion.

I slowly walk over to Amelia, following Beatrice's instructions. Sitting beside her, I take her cold hand in mine, feeling the chill of her skin against my palm. I rub it gently, hoping to bring some warmth to her lifeless fingers, willing her to hold on, to fight for her life.

Staring at her pale face, my heart clenches with sadness. Despite the relief of seeing her wounds sealed, I can't shake the image of the pain she must have endured from those silver bullets. I can only imagine the agony she felt, and it fills me with a sense of helplessness and regret. What if I had been just a second too late? Ember's accomplice could have stolen her from me forever.

The only reason I was even outside searching for her was because I knew she wouldn't pass up the chance to shift. It was the mate bond that drove me to act, pushing me to go look for her despite my reservations. And now, as I sit by her side, I can't deny the gratitude I feel for that bond. It may have forced my hand, but it also led me to save her life. I'm glad I did, as a small part of me, without the influence of the mate bond, feel a sense of happiness in being able to save her.

Beatrice returns a few seconds later, her hands laden with supplies and a determined look on her face. With practiced precision, she begins her work, utilizing magic to cleanse my blood of the oak tree venom before transferring it to Amelia. As she works, I feel a strange mix of relief and anxiety coursing through me. Will my blood be enough to save her?

Beatrice tends to my wounds in between her tasks, applying herbs to speed up my healing process. I wince at the sting of the herbs, but I know they're necessary to counteract the venom's effects.

I watch the color slowly return to Amelia's face; a sense of relief washes over me. I couldn't bear to see her in her earlier state again, and in that moment, I make a silent vow to do whatever it takes to bring back the vibrancy to her cheeks. As I continue to stare at her beautiful face, a knock at the door breaks the silence, and I catch the familiar scent of Eric and his mate. With a word, I invite them in.

"Amelia!" Lily cries, rushing to her side on the bed. I release Amelia's hand as Lily grabs it, tears streaming down her face as she gazes at her.

"What happened?" Eric's voice is filled with disbelief as he addresses me.

"Ember tried to kidnap Amelia."

"You're joking," Eric exclaims, his brows furrowing in disbelief.

"I wish I were. Despite narrowly escaping her father's men and avoiding execution this morning, she still managed to attract

trouble," I explain, shaking my head in disbelief.

"That woman never ceases to amaze, and the vampires aiding her are equally foolish."

"We agree there," I reply with a grimace. "But now we must focus on finding Ember. Eric, I need you to mobilize our best trackers and locate her."

"I'll get on it immediately, Your Majesty," Eric replies, his expression serious as he prepares to carry out my orders.

"Good," I say, noticing Eric's smile. My brows knit together in confusion. He cares about Amelia, so her situation should sadden him.

"Why are you smiling?" I inquire, my tone laced with suspicion.

"Nothing," Eric responds, his smile widening.

"Eric," I growl lowly, hating how secretive he's been.

"I'm just happy to see you care about Amelia," he explains, his smile unwavering.

"I don't care about her," I retort sharply, attempting to mask the truth.

"You do," Eric insists, his expression softening with understanding.

"I'm only saving her life and capturing Ember to ensure she doesn't interfere with my plans for revenge," I argue, my tone defensive.

"I know," Eric acknowledges, his smile persisting.

"Get out," I bark at him, feeling uncomfortable with the direction of our conversation.

"No problem, Your Majesty. But before I leave, I want to remind you that it's okay to care about her, Nickolas. She is your mate, and just because she is Nathaniel's daughter doesn't mean she isn't worthy of your love."

With that, Eric takes his mate and leaves, leaving me to contemplate his words in the quiet of Amelia's room.

After he leaves I allow his words to sink in and wrestle with the truth they hold. The idea of caring for Amelia, of truly acknowledging it, is daunting. It will change a lot of things, things I might not even be ready for.

I push aside these thoughts, shutting them out as I close my eyes. Sleep eludes me amidst the ongoing blood transfusion, but I find solace in envisioning Amelia's face—the most beautiful sight to me. The image of her baby blue eyes fills my mind, offering a flicker of

hope that I will see them again.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

AMELIA

My eyes flutter open, squinting against the harsh light filtering into the room. As I move to shield my eyes with my right hand, I'm startled to find it stuck in something. Turning toward it, my eyes widen in surprise as I see Nickolas sleeping soundly on my hand.

A rush of confusion floods through me as I quickly scan my body, only to find that all my wounds are miraculously healed, with not a single scar in sight. It's impossible. What the hell happened?

With a sense of disbelief, I carefully extract my hand from under Nickolas's head, sitting up as I stare in awe at my fully healed body. The events of the previous night flood back to me in a whirlwind of memories, but none of them offer any explanation for this miraculous recovery.

“You’re awake,” Nickolas says, his voice tinged with exhaustion as he yawns, dark circles under his eyes. My gaze shifts to his hand, where I notice a scar. Could it be possible? My brows furrow in confusion, but the thought is quickly dismissed as impossible.

Wetting my lips, I prepare to speak, but before I can utter a word, the door bursts open, and Beatrice strides into the room.

“You're truly awake,” she says, her smile warm as she begins to examine my body with a small ball of water in her hand, which touches my skin without wetting it.

“How did you know?” I inquire, watching as Nickolas rises from the seat beside my bed and moves toward the door.

“I placed a spell over your eyes so I could know when they open,” Beatrice explains.

“Oh,” I respond, my attention shifting to Nickolas as he prepares

to leave. I want to stop him, but the words seem to stick in my throat.

“Ouch!” I yelp suddenly, feeling a sharp sting on my shoulders. Beatrice smacks them.

“This is the last time I am ever going to save your life from danger,” she scolds, grabbing my ear and pulling it firmly. I grimace, placing my hand over hers to alleviate some of the pain.

“Do you hear me?” she demands, but her voice is filled with a hint of affection.

“Yes, I do. Please, let go of my ear,” I plead, the burning sensation in my ear intensifying with her firm grip.

“Better,” she says, sniffing as she releases my ear. “I'm so happy to see you doing better so fast.” Beatrice's shoulders drop in relief, her eyes reflecting the same sentiment.

“How come I am?” I ask, bewildered by my sudden recovery from near-death so much I could take an ear pull from Beatrice.

“His Majesty,” she answers simply.

“His Majesty?” I repeat, raising a brow in confusion.

“He gave you blood as I drained you of yours stained with silver,” she explains.

“Nickolas did the silver cleaning treatment,” I say, shocked to the core that he would go to such lengths for me.

“Yes,” Beatrice confirms.

“Wow! I didn’t know he wished to kill my father that much,” I remark bitterly, feeling a pang of betrayal pierce my heart. He must’ve done it solely because of his desire for revenge, not concern for my well-being.

“I don’t think that’s why he did it, dear,” Beatrice counters gently.

“We both know it’s not because he cares for me, that’s for sure,” I retort, dismissing the idea with a bitter laugh.

“And what if he does?” Beatrice's question catches me off guard, leaving me speechless for a moment. I stare at her like she just said the craziest shit ever, which she just did.

“Nickolas doesn’t give two shits about me. He only gave me his blood so I wouldn’t die and ruin his plans for revenge. That’s all,” I argue vehemently.

“Okay, if you say so, dear. But then explain to me why he risked his life to find the man who tortured you, even at the cost of getting attacked with oak tree venom. And despite the wounds he sustained

from it, he was there for you when you needed help," Beatrice challenges, her words striking a chord within me.

"What are you talking about?" I ask, puzzled.

"The night you had a nightmare, and Nickolas comforted you while he was injured," Beatrice clarifies, her words sparking a revelation within me. Suddenly, everything falls into place—the day Nickolas comforted me while injured and why his wound wasn't healing after he shattered the glass. It dawns on me that he must have been injured with oak tree venom. Even though days have passed, the effects lingered in his body. But one question remains: why did Adam use oak tree venom to attack him?

I want to ask Beatrice, but my mind is still reeling from the realization that Nickolas comforted me while injured—an injury that was partly my fault. The revelation leaves me stunned.

"Exactly, even you can tell he will only do that because he cares," Beatrice says, snapping me out of my thoughts. I stare at her, conflicted and unsure whether to believe her words. Part of me wants to, but another part remains skeptical.

"I want to believe you, Beatrice, but it's hard. Things between Nickolas and I aren't that simple," I confess, my voice filled with uncertainty.

"I understand, dear, but I am telling you this so you can keep your heart open. I wish to see the both of you happy together one day and all this quest for revenge done with," Beatrice explains gently, her words touching a chord within me.

"I hardly doubt that day will come, Beatrice," I reply, feeling a sense of resignation wash over me as I sink back onto the bed, lost in my thoughts.

Beatrice leaves me alone with my doubts, heading to the kitchen to prepare something for me to eat. As I ponder over her words, I can't help but wonder if true happiness with Nickolas is even possible amidst the tangled web of revenge and deceit that surrounds us.

"I think she's right," Marie says, flittering into my mind.

"Or you wish she's right because that means there's hope for Nickolas and I to be a couple," I counter.

"Maybe, but think about it. He didn't have to kill Adam," Marie persists, her voice gentle but insistent.

"I think he did since Adam wanted me dead," I argue.

"That's true, but he didn't need to kill him so brutally, but he

did. Where do you think all that rage he unleashed on Adam came from?" Marie counters.

"From the fact that Adam almost took his revenge from him."

"No! Because he hurt you. We both know that's why he killed him so brutally," Marie insists, her words piercing through me with a sudden clarity. It's a painful truth to accept, but deep down, I can't deny that she might be right. Nickolas's actions may have been from protectiveness over me, but our relationship remains fraught with complexity and doubt.

"But still, it's not enough to say he cares about us. He might just be doing all these things because of the mate bond, not because he wants to."

"That's also true, but you and I know the mate bond can only make you want to do it, not force you to do it," Marie reminds me, her words echoing in my mind.

"Yeah." I agree with her, sighing heavily as I contemplate what it would mean if Nickolas truly cares about me. What it would mean for us. But for now, I decide to set aside my doubts and uncertainties, choosing instead to focus on the present and not burden myself with thoughts of the future until I know for sure.

•••

My heart pounds as I stand in front of Nickolas's bedroom door, a bowl of medicine in my hand. It's a strange turn of events—I'm the one who almost lost my life, yet it's Nickolas who now needs herbs to recover. Because of what he did, I'm almost fully healed, but I can't say the same for him. Beatrice told me he sustained some injuries while he fought the vampires, and on top of that, he gave me his blood. Beatrice explained that his status as the king of vampires is the only thing keeping him from being bedridden. If he were an ordinary vampire, he would be fighting for his life right now.

Still, none of this explains why I find myself at his door with a bowl of medicine. Beatrice made a bet with me, challenging me to prove her wrong—that Nickolas doesn't truly care about me. To do so, she suggested I get close to him. According to her, once I'm close enough, I'll be able to discern his true intentions. And so, here I am, about to enter his room and tend to him, all in the name of testing Beatrice's theory.

Taking a deep breath, I softly knock on Nickolas's bedroom door and wait for him to let me in.

"Come in," he says after a few seconds.

Gently pushing the door open, I step inside and find Nickolas standing by his desk, about to pour himself a glass of whiskey. Remembering Beatrice's instructions to ensure he doesn't drink while recovering, I quickly walk over and stop him.

I place the bowl of medicine on the table and reach out to halt his hand as he's about to pour the drink. Nickolas lifts his eyes, a questioning look in them as he meets my gaze. I offer him a smile as I collect the bottle from his hand and place it out of his reach.

"Beatrice asked me to do that," I explain, hoping he won't be too upset with me for my bold move.

“I see,” Nickolas says, his voice calm as he rubs his chin, taking a seat behind his desk. I exhale, silently thanking the heavens that he didn’t unleash his wrath upon me for what I did. Moving to where I kept the bowl, I push it closer to him and nudge him to drink it. Another command from Beatrice is that I must ensure he finishes everything in the bowl, so I wait.

Nickolas reclines into his seat, his eyes fixated on me with an amused glint. I glance at him, confused by his amusement, but before I can question him, I yelp in surprise as he suddenly reaches for my hand and pulls me onto his lap. I stiffen, feeling warmth seeping into my body from his touch, unsure of what to make of this unexpected turn of events.

“Feed it to me,” Nickolas commands, handing me the bowl and placing it in my trembling hands. I grip onto it tightly, determined not to let it slip. With a deep breath, I attempt to lift the spoon to his mouth, but my hands shake, and the contents of the bowl drip all over me before even reaching him. I curse under my breath, shutting my eyes tightly as I pray that Nickolas won’t make a big deal out of my mistake.

“I'm sorry,” I rasp, my heart pounding in my chest as I await his reaction. Despite him giving me his blood, I fear he won't hesitate to reprimand me for messing up something as simple as feeding him.

My eyes shoot open as I feel something warm touch my delicate skin. I gasp in surprise, widening my eyes as I realize it's Nickolas's tongue. Slowly, he licks every inch of my skin that the herb spilled on, causing me to clench my knees together in a mixture of shock

and arousal. What the hell is happening?

"I think it tastes better on you," Nickolas murmurs, his voice husky with desire, as he draws his head away from my body. I sit frozen on his thighs, my heart racing at his words. Suddenly, he grabs the bowl from my hands and pours its contents over my body in a sensual cascade. I gasp as the liquid trickles down my skin while I lock eyes with Nickolas, his gaze ablaze with lust and hunger.

Slowly, he lifts my shirt, his touch sending shivers down my spine, and before I can process what's happening, I find myself clutching his shoulder, my nails digging into his flesh, as his warm mouth descends upon my left breast. My breath catches in my throat as he sucks hard, sending electric waves of pleasure coursing through me. With closed eyes, I abandon all thoughts of questioning what's going on, simply reveling in the blissful moment with Nickolas.

He takes his time worshiping my right breast before trailing his tongue up to my shoulder blade and neck. I feel his fangs extend against my skin, but he doesn't bite down. Instead, he grazes my skin with them, sending a burning desire coursing through me. Returning to my left breast, he takes it into his mouth, sucking, massaging, and worshiping it as if he were starved for it. My eyes roll back in ecstasy, and I dig my nails deeper into his shoulder, loving the feeling of being wanted and desired in ways I never thought possible.

Nickolas takes his time on my left breast, his touch sending shivers of pleasure coursing through me, before gently pushing me against his desk to clean the herb remnants from my lower belly. My hands instinctively thread into his hair, relishing the soft curls beneath my fingertips as I resist the urge to guide him lower to satisfy the burning need between my legs.

As he finishes, I hope he satisfies the throbbing ache between my thighs, but he doesn't. Nickolas lifts his head with a smile, leaving me breathless and needy, my nipples hardened and my core pulsating with desire.

"Did you come for anything else, Amelia?" he asks, mischief dancing in his eyes.

"No," I reply, scrambling off his thighs and hastily pulling down my shirt. Being still damp from the spilled liquid, it offers little cover, leaving my hardened nipples visible to his gaze.

"Good. You can change into one of the shirts in my closet before you leave," he says casually, reaching for the bottle of whiskey I had pushed away earlier and pouring himself a drink. I open my mouth to protest, but the words die on my lips as realization sinks in. He freaking punished me for stopping him earlier. He turned me on and left me unsatisfied.

I glare at him as he casually sips his drink, frustration surging through my chest. I wish, more than anything right now, that I weren't so sensitive to his touch. If I weren't, he wouldn't be able to punish me like this. Turning away, I stomp my feet on the ground with each step toward his closet, his chuckle only adding fuel to my frustration.

"I will get you back, Nickolas," I mutter under my breath, vowing to exact revenge for his actions today. Pausing on my way out, I turn to face him by his desk. There's another reason I came here tonight.

"Thank you for saving my life," I say, meeting his gaze as he pauses from reading the papers in front of him. He stares at me for a moment before nodding in acknowledgment. With his shirt draped over my body and the remainder of his handy work still lingering between my legs, I stride out of the room. I need to get Nickolas back for leaving me unsatisfied for the second time. I felt him hard against my ass while sitting on his thighs, so two can definitely play this game, and I couldn’t be more excited to begin.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

A few days have passed since I was attacked. Thanks to Nickolas, I am fully healed and free of scars. I climb out of bed and step into my bathroom for a shower, my mind swirling. Lily left the previous night to search for her parents and gather news about mine. My heart beats every second, fearing Eric might spot her meeting with her father and capture him. Fervent prayers escape me, begging that wouldn't happen, that she will return safely with word on how my family fares.

These past few days, I haven't crossed paths with Nickolas. I won't say he's deliberately avoiding me, nor I him, but our paths just haven't crossed much. He's been engrossed in fortifying the castle's defenses and attending to court matters. Beatrice expressed her concern that he didn't take adequate time to rest and heal properly, and I couldn't help but share a similar worry. However, so far, he's managed to defy our expectations by not experiencing any health complications despite his busy schedule.

I step out of the bathroom, clutching my towel tightly around my body, only to be startled by Nickolas's unexpected presence. The towel slips from my grip, puddling at my feet and leaving me exposed before his intense gaze. Heat floods my cheeks as I hastily scoop it up, rewrapping it securely while his eyes remain unabashedly fixed on me. When I finally meet his stare, fully intending to glare at him for not averting his eyes and for catching me so off guard, the rebuke dies on my lips. His expression is thunderous, dark eyes swirling with an undisguised desire that immediately diminishes any lingering annoyance to mere embers.

My throat constricts as I swallow hard, feeling the weight of his

heated gaze like a physical caress on my exposed skin. The towel wrapped around my body suddenly feels too thin, too inadequate to shield me from the intensity of his desire. His eyes linger hungrily on the curve of my shoulders and the length of my legs, igniting a fire within me that threatens to consume us both. Summoning every ounce of courage, I clear my throat, attempting to pull him from his trance before he set me aflame with those scorching eyes alone.

"Nickolas," I call out softly, my voice emerging breathy and hollow.

"Amelia," he replies, his voice husky, his eyes ablaze with lust as they finally meet mine, breaking free from their wandering gaze over my body.

I wet my lips nervously, watching his eyes gawk at them, his Adam's apple bobbing in response. A sudden wave of heat washes over me, making me flush and causing me to gently fan myself in an attempt to cool down.

"Why are you here?" I rasp out, my voice barely above a whisper yet filled with an underlying current of anticipation.

"Why am I here?" He repeats my question as if he's pondering it himself. I'm taken aback by the effect I seem to have on him, surprised that my presence could make him so confused. After all, Nickolas had seen me naked before, so I never thought my body held any allure for him. But the way he looks at me now tells a different story, and it’s almost unbelievable. But with this realization, my plan to get back at him feels much more achievable, knowing he's attracted to me.

"Yes, Nickolas," I breathe, closing the distance between us, my heart hammering with newfound confidence as I lean in close, feeling the electric tension crackling between us. "Why. Are. You. Here?" I whisper directly against his ear, the warmth of my breath mingling with his skin, enveloping him in a heady embrace.

Pulling back slightly, I watch in rapt fascination as his eyes flutter open, and the lustful gaze has metamorphosed into something rawer, more primal—a hunger so scorching and potent that it sends delicious shivers racing down my spine. In that heated moment, I have no doubts about the power my body holds over this man, and it unlocks something feral within me in return, a primal instinct that begs to be unleashed.

"I came to..." His words fade into the background as I saunter over to my closet, exaggerating the sway of my hips with each step.

I can feel his gaze burning into me, his desire palpable in the air. My knees tremble with exhilaration, my smile widening at the thought of what's to come. Oh, Nickolas, I haven't even started.

“"Would you like to join me for breakfast?" I call out from inside the walk-in closet, noting his hesitation to step inside with me.

"Sure," he replies, his voice betraying a hint of uncertainty.

Quickly slipping into my outfit for the day—a simple yet alluring, low-cut, heart-shaped knee-length dress adorned with a delicate floral design—I emerge from the closet to join Nickolas. As I walk past him, I catch a fleeting glimpse of appreciation in his eyes, a silent acknowledgment of my choice of attire.

I instruct him to meet me in the dining room in a few minutes while I make my way downstairs to inform Beatrice of our breakfast plans. Normally, I would join her in the kitchen for our morning meal, but today is different since I asked Nickolas to join me. I pause for a moment, pondering whether the castle even has a grand dining area. There's an eating area for witches, but whether there's a designated dining room remains a mystery to me. I make a mental note to ask Beatrice about it once I've relayed the news of our breakfast arrangement.

Stepping into the kitchen, I find Beatrice expertly flipping golden pancakes with a practiced flick of her wrist as they sizzle enticingly on the stovetop. Perfect. She couldn't have prepared a more fitting breakfast for what I have planned for Nickolas.

"Morning, Beatrice," I announce, making my way closer to where she stands. The rich, buttery scent of pancakes wafting through the air makes my mouth water.

"Morning, child. How are you doing today?" she inquires, her eyes scanning my face with a mixture of concern and warmth. I can't help but smile at her, reflecting on how our relationship has evolved over time. Gone is the cranky woman who barely acknowledged my existence when we first met. Now, she treats me with kindness and care. I'm grateful that things have changed. Life here was hell enough, and it's refreshing to have someone other than Eric treating me like a person.

"I'm good," I reply, returning her smile and gently pulling her hand away from my forehead where she had been checking my temperature.

"And your wolf?" she asks, her concern extending to Marie.

"She's fine and says hello," I assure her, feeling a sense of

gratitude for Beatrice's genuine interest in my well-being.

"That's good to hear. I'll speak to the king about allowing you to take runs in wolf form. It will be good for you," Beatrice suggests, her attention already shifting back to the stove as she continues cooking.

"That would be nice. And speaking of the king, he'll be joining us for breakfast today," I announce, watching for her reaction.

"What?" Beatrice's surprise is evident as she abruptly turns around, a spoonful of pancake batter splattering everywhere, including onto my clothes and body.

"Beatrice!" I exclaim, trying to dodge the flying batter, some of it landing on my face.

"Why?" she asks, wide-eyed, clearly taken aback by the unexpected news.

"Because I asked him," I reply, attempting to clean the batter off my cheeks and licking it off my fingers. Hmm, it tastes amazing.

"And he agreed?" Beatrice asks, her eyes narrowing slightly as she studies my expression.

"Yes," I reply evenly, holding her searching gaze. A crease forms between my brows as I wonder at her scrutinizing look. "What?"

"Nothing," she responds, the corners of her mouth curving upwards in a placid smile as she turns back to the sizzling pancakes.

I'm not convinced. "Beatrice," I press, recognizing the telltale sign of her holding something back.

"Nothing, child," she insists, her voice light and airy as she hums a tune, busying herself with fetching another plate from the shelves, presumably for Nickolas. But the tension in the air tells me there's more to her reaction than she's letting on, and I can't help but wonder what secrets she's not telling me.

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I settle at the long, ornate dining table in the room I didn't even know existed until today. According to Beatrice, it's reserved solely for Nickolas's formal dinner meetings with other supernatural leaders. As I wait, sunlight streams through the tall windows, bathing the intimate dining room in a warm morning glow. The table is laid out with an elegant breakfast spread—steaming platters of golden pancakes, jewel-toned jars of syrup and preserves, and pitchers of fresh juice.

I exhale slowly, trying to steady the anxious flutter in my chest at

the sound of Nickolas's footsteps drawing nearer, each one echoing in the silence of the room. Beatrice excuses herself from joining us, leaving us alone to have breakfast. Nerves twist my stomach into knots, though I chide myself for the ridiculous unease. This is hardly the first time I've eaten before him. And yet... an electrifying sense of delicious anticipation threads through the anxiety. Because what I've meticulously planned for this particular breakfast could either inflame the simmering tension between us in the most intriguing way or risk making my life more complicated.

I steel myself with a steadying breath as Nickolas enters the dining room, his tall frame cutting an impossibly striking figure in head-to-toe black, as always. A fleeting thought passes through my mind to one day inquire about his seeming aversion to other colors.

"Pancakes," he states plainly as he approaches the table, taking the seat across from mine. Beatrice had instructed me to sit at the head of the table—an arrangement I'd worried might provoke Nickolas's ire. But she had assured me with an enigmatic look that this seat rightfully belonged to me, and he would take no issue with it. Though I don't understand her meaning, true to her word, he makes no protest.

"One of humans' and, I believe, wolves' favorites," he continues, giving his plate a cursory glance before those piercing green eyes flick up to meet my gaze. My breath hitches momentarily under the weight of that stare.

Clearing my throat, I gesture to the spread laid out before us. "Yes, shall we?"

"Yes," he replies with a slight incline of his head, gesturing for me to take my seat first.

As I settle across from him, I exhale again, steadying my nerves. There's no turning back now. With fervent prayers, I grasp my fork, praying my carefully constructed seduction will unfurl exactly as I envision.

“"Mmm, oh my! This tastes amazing," I draw out, allowing a low moan of pleasure to escape my lips as I savor the delectable flavors dancing on my taste buds. I can feel Nickolas's eyes on me, his gaze lingering as I take another deliberate bite, relishing in the sensation of his scrutiny. Yes, the first step is accomplished.

I lift my eyes to meet his intense gaze as I drizzle syrup lavishly over my pancakes, pouring far more than strictly necessary. Cutting off a sticky bite, I bring it to my lips with exaggerated slowness,

letting the excess syrup drip down my chin, staining my shirt, but I pay it no mind. Instead, I close my eyes and let out an appreciative moan, relishing in the explosion of flavors that dance across my taste buds.

Setting my fork down with deliberate grace, I slowly open my eyes, a mischievous twinkle dancing in their depths as I catch sight of Nickolas, his gaze hazy and fixated on me. I know it's only a matter of time before I catch the scent of his arousal, but for now, I revel in the power I hold over him.

"Oh, heavens!" I gasp, feigning disbelief as I glance down at my intentionally stained cleavage. "How did that get there?"

Slowly, deliberately, I trace my index finger through the sugary mess, collecting the rich sweetness on my fingertip. Holding Nickolas's heated stare, I bring that glistening digit to my mouth and slowly drag it between my parted lips with an appreciative hum of delight at the decadent taste.

Nickolas's Adam's apple bobs as he swallows hard, his eyes momentarily flickering away from my mouth and down to his legs. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat, undoing two buttons on his shirt.

"Is something wrong?" I ask innocently, a smile playing at the corners of my lips as I bask in the success of my seductive ploy.

"Nothing is wrong," he quickly replies, his confusion evident as he meets my gaze. But then it hits me like a wave crashing over me —his arousal. A surge of satisfaction courses through me, a triumphant smile spreading across my lips. I've accomplished my goal, and the knowledge fills me with a sense of exhilaration.

I continue eating as if I hadn't just left him with blue balls. Today, indeed, must be my lucky day, achieving such success not once but twice in one morning. With a satisfied grin, I relish in the feeling of knowing that I, too, could leave him unsatisfied and wanting more.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Dread coils in the pit of my stomach as I make my way down the marble staircase to Nickolas's study. He summoned me, no doubt, to discuss my behavior at breakfast. My shoulders slump with a sense of sadness. It was nice while it lasted. But instead of dwelling on my sadness, I should be praying that he doesn't make me regret my actions.

Stepping into his office, my hands suddenly grow clammy as I approach Nickolas's desk. I discreetly wipe them on my dress, trying to compose myself as I clear my throat to speak.

"You asked for me," I say, my voice barely above a whisper, the confidence I had earlier that morning now nowhere to be found. Nickolas nods in acknowledgment but remains focused on the papers spread out before him, seemingly indifferent to my presence. Sweat begins to bead on my forehead as I brace myself for the inevitable confrontation. He's going to reprimand me for sure. I should have known better than to toy with him like I did earlier.

Suddenly, I'm jolted out of my thoughts by the sound of Nickolas slamming the document he's reading onto his desk. My heart leaps into my throat as he rises from his chair and rushes to my side in a matter of seconds. I stand there trembling as I pray silently he only shouts his displeasure, not dole out any harsh punishment for my bold behavior this morning.

"What's wrong?" he asks, his eyes filled with genuine concern as he grabs my arm, pulling me closer to him. I freeze, my body no longer trembling as I struggle to comprehend his unexpected reaction. "Amelia," he calls, gently shaking me to bring me out of my trance.

"Nothing, I'm fine," I manage to reply, attempting to extricate myself from his grasp. He releases me without protest.

"Are you sure?" Nickolas asks, his brow furrowing with an expression of genuine concern that has me regarding him with narrowed eyes.

Why does he seem so inexplicably worried about me? It is...weird. "Yes, I'm sure," I state firmly, forcing conviction into my voice.

"That's good to hear," he replies with a small nod before turning away to approach his desk. Retrieving something from its surface, he extends it out to me. "Here you go."

"Eric asked me to give this to you," Nickolas explains as he hands me the square-shaped object wrapped in plain paper. I tear it open and can't stifle the excited squeal that bursts from my lips.

"Oh heavens above!" I clutch the gift tightly, practically vibrating with glee. "I can't believe Eric actually got this for me!" My voice rises into an embarrassingly girlish pitch of delight.

"Hmm," Nickolas murmurs, the small sound effectively grounding me back to reality. I quickly compose myself.

"Sorry," I murmur sheepishly.

"It's fine," he assures with a dismissive wave of his hand as he moves to retake his seat behind the desk.

"I didn't know you were a reader." He dons his glasses,

leaning forward with curious intensity. "What kind of books do you enjoy?"

I settle across from him, excitement bubbling up at the prospect

of discussing my passion.

"I read all types of romance novels," I reply with a bright smile.

"Hmm, I should've known." He leans back abruptly, retrieving files from his drawer in a dismissive gesture. As he buries himself in the paperwork, something clicks inside me—a flicker of offense at his indifferent "hmm."

"Do you have a problem with someone who only reads romance?" I ask carefully. I've encountered supernaturals who view such tales as frivolous wastes of time. A sinking feeling tells me Nickolas may be among them. He looks up, his gaze piercing.

"I won't say it's a waste of time, but I believe nothing is truly gained by reading such...fluff." Anger surges through me like a flashfire.

"What do you mean nothing is gained?" I demand hotly. "I'll have

you know I've learned a great deal from romance books." Nickolas huffs out a skeptical breath. "Nickolas!" I exclaim, fuming at his obvious disdain.

"Name one thing you've learned that made a significant impact," he challenges, holding my stare unblinkingly.

"A lot of things," I reply, desperately searching my brain for something that Nickolas won't be able to refute.

"I said name one, Amelia," he interjects, his gaze piercing and unwavering, causing my mind to suddenly go blank. I've learned countless things from my books, many of which are deeply personal and intimate. They've taught me about aspects of myself that I once felt ashamed of, but reading about them made me proud to embrace my sexual desires. However, I can't bring myself to reveal those to Nickolas, no matter how much they've empowered me.

"That's what I thought," he says, diverting his attention back to the papers in front of him.

A ball of fury ignites in my chest, fueled by the need to defend my cherished books. Without a second thought, I snatch the papers from Nickolas's desk and forcefully lift his chin to meet my gaze. His eyes widen in surprise, but he makes no move to stop me.

"I will have you know that my 'book daddies' have taught me a lot of things," I declare, my voice trembling with a mixture of defiance and passion.

"Book 'daddies'?" Nickolas raises a brow.

"Yes, book 'daddies,'" I reply, maintaining the same level of confidence that had propelled me to lift his chin moments before.

"And what have they taught you, little one?" he asks, his hand finding its way into my hair, sending a shiver down my spine. I swallow hard, caught off guard by the unexpected gesture.

"So many things," I respond, meeting his gaze with a heart pounding in my chest. Our proximity is intoxicating, his scent enveloping me like a warm embrace.

"Like being daddy's good girl," Nickolas murmurs, his gaze unwavering. My breath catches in my throat.

How does he know? Does he understand what I'm into?

He pulls back, a smirk playing at the corners of his lips. It's then that I realize—he definitely knows. With a slow, deliberate movement, he withdraws his hand from my hair and leans back in his seat, the smirk still lingering on his face.

Without another word, I shoot out of the chair and bolt from his

office, my mind racing with questions and confusion.

How the hell does he know?

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Later that night, I find myself seated in the kitchen, the soft glow of the overhead lights casting a warm ambiance over the room. With my dinner on the counter and my beloved book in hand. Having whiled away the day immersed in its pages, I'm already halfway through. Beside me, Beatrice observes with mild interest, her gaze lingering on the book clenched in my grasp.

"For a princess, I'm surprised you had the time to take up such a human hobby," she remarks, her tone tinged with curiosity.

"You would be surprised," I reply, forcing a smile as memories of my unconventional childhood flood my mind.

"Why does it sound like you didn’t have a typical royal upbringing?" Beatrice probes gently, her keen intuition cutting through my facade.

"You could say that," I murmur, turning a page in my book before taking a bite of my dinner, attempting to deflect her inquiries. But Beatrice isn't easily deterred.

"Amelia," she calls out, her voice laced with an undertone of concern. I lift my eyes from the pages of my book to meet her gaze, a knot of unease forming in the pit of my stomach.

"Did something happen to you when you were young?" she asks, her words piercing through the carefully constructed walls I've built around my past.

I feel my breath catch in my throat as a tidal wave of memories

threatens to overwhelm me. How could she possibly know? The tears well up in my eyes, betraying the turmoil raging within me as I struggle to contain the flood of emotions threatening to consume me.

"Amelia, what's wrong?" Beatrice rushes to my side, her expression filled with genuine concern and worry. Without warning, the dam breaks, and I find myself crumbling in her arms, the weight of my past crashing down upon me like a torrential downpour. With each sob that wracks my body, I release a lifetime's worth of pain and sorrow, allowing myself to finally confront the demons that have haunted me for so long. "It's okay, dear. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Beatrice coos, her soothing voice a balm to my shattered nerves. I cling to her, finding solace in her

comforting embrace as I allow myself to release the pent-up emotions that have been weighing me down for so long.

With each tear that falls, I silently reassure myself that the pain of the past is just that—the past. But the wounds still ache, the memories still haunt me, and it's a relief to finally have someone to share the burden with.

I'm not sure how long I cry, but by the time I pull away from Beatrice, my eyes are sore, my head throbs with a dull ache, and my face is flushed and swollen from the deluge of tears.

"Why don't you go upstairs and take a shower while I make you some tea for the headache?" Beatrice suggests, her gaze soft and concerned as she studies my weary face.

"That would be nice of you," I sniffle, nodding gratefully as I slowly rise from the kitchen stool, clutching my book tightly in my hand.

Turning to leave, my book slips from my grasp, hitting the ground with a heavy thud just as Nickolas materializes before me, knocking the air from my lungs. His grip on my arm is tight, his expression twisted with anger as he snarls in my face.

"Who hurt you?" he demands, his gaze fixated on my face, his anger palpable with each passing moment he stares at me. I meet his intense stare with confusion, wondering why he's so incensed about my condition. And when exactly did he arrive?

"Who, Amelia?" he repeats, shaking me roughly in an attempt to snap me out of my daze.

"Nobody, Your Majesty," Beatrice interjects on my behalf. I turn to her, puzzled, to find her smiling as she observes Nickolas and me.

My confusion deepens; why isn't she as bewildered by Nickolas's behavior as I am?

"Then why is she crying?" Nickolas demands, his anger still palpable.

"She spoke about her childhood," Beatrice explains, though technically, I hadn't explicitly shared anything about my past. But the mere mention of my upbringing had been enough to trigger a flood of emotions.

"What?" Nickolas's grip on my arm loosens as confusion clouds his features.

"Why don't I leave you two to discuss?" Beatrice suggests, excusing herself from the room without waiting for a response. Once she's gone, Nickolas turns his attention back to me, his gaze

piercing as he studies my face.

"What's she talking about?" he asks, his tone softer this time.

"Nothing," I reply hastily, wiping away the tear stains from my cheeks and forcing a smile. Nickolas raises a skeptical brow, clearly unconvinced by my feeble attempt at denial.

"I don't want to talk about it," I murmur, dropping my gaze to the floor, hoping he won't press me further.

To my surprise, his calloused fingers gently lift my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze once more. Confusion swirls in my mind as I stare into his eyes, seeing a depth of understanding and compassion that I've never witnessed before.

He wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his chest, enveloping me in his warmth and the familiar scent that never fails to comfort me.

"It's okay if you don't want to talk about it. I'm here whenever you're ready," he murmurs softly into my hair, his words unexpected but more than welcome. "But I just want to know something," he continues, his voice gentle but insistent.

"What?" I mumble, my voice muffled against his chest. He pulls me away slightly, locking eyes with me as he poses his question.

"Was it a person or a terrible incident?"

The weight of revisiting my painful past settles heavily on my shoulders, and I hesitate for a moment before responding. Despite my reluctance, I can sense that my answer holds significance for him, and so I speak truthfully even if I don't know why.

"It wasn't just one person," I admit, my gaze drifting downward as I wrestle with the memories that threaten to engulf me.

"Were they in the ballroom that day?" he presses, his voice tinged with a hint of urgency.

"I'm not sure," I reply softly, my fingers fidgeting nervously as I contemplate the implications of his question. Taking a deep breath, he moves his hands to cup my face, his touch gentle yet firm as he meets my gaze.

"I guess my torturing days aren't over yet," he declares, his eyes burning with resolve. Confusion clouds my thoughts as I try to understand what he meant by that statement.

"I make this promise to you, Amelia. I will make them pay, and not just them. Any fucking person that dares to lay a finger on you will face my wrath." He speaks with a conviction that sends shivers down my spine.

I freeze, my eyes widening in disbelief. Did he just say that? As I stare into his unwavering gaze, I realize with a jolt that he means every word. My heart races in my chest, a whirlwind of emotions swirling within me as I grapple with the overwhelming sincerity of his words. At that moment, I find myself rendered speechless, utterly awestruck by the depth of his commitment to me.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

"Can we go somewhere private to talk?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper as I tuck a stray lock of hair behind my ear. His promise has stirred something within me, a longing to share the full story of my past. I'm curious to see how he'll react, to gauge if he'll see me differently.

"Sure," he agrees, his hand finding mine and giving it a gentle squeeze. He leads us to his office.

As he settles behind his desk, I take a seat opposite him, my fingers fidgeting in my lap. Nerves flutter in my stomach. Opening up about this part of my life is never easy. Maybe it would have been easier if we had just been regular mates, but we're not. But as I consider what I have to lose by telling him, I realize it's not much. He can't use my past against me or my family. At worst, it might change how he sees me, but perhaps not in a negative way.

I lift my gaze from my lap, my eyes locking with his. Those mesmerizing green orbs seem to calm the storm within me, giving me the courage to speak. "I was bullied growing up," I confess, the words heavy on my tongue.

Nickolas's eyes widen, but he remains silent, allowing me to continue. I'm grateful for his patience and the space he's giving me to share my story at my own pace.

"You're probably wondering how it's possible for a princess to be bullied," I continue, a rueful smile tugging at my lips. "It wasn't always to my face, but with werewolf hearing, I didn't need it to be. The whispers, the stares... they were enough." I take a shaky breath, steeling myself for the next part. "When I was born, I couldn't mask my scent." Nickolas's eyes widen further, understanding dawning in

their depths. "I couldn't do it until I turned thirteen. My parents told everyone I was sick, so I didn't attend school or play outside in public. By the time I could control my scent, everyone had already formed their assumptions about me."

Tears prick at my eyes, and I blink them back, determined to push through. "People were afraid to get close to me, worried that the disease that had supposedly plagued me for thirteen years might infect them. My peers laughed at me behind my back for shifting late. Most children shift at five, but I didn't until I was thirteen. I spent most of my childhood alone or with my family when they weren't busy. That's why I don't like talking about it."

A tear escapes, trailing down my cheek, and I hastily wipe it away. The weight of those memories, the loneliness and isolation, threatens to overwhelm me. But there's a strange sense of relief in finally sharing this burden with someone, in letting Nickolas see the scars that have shaped me into the person I am today.

I look up at Nickolas, my face stained with tears and flushed red from the raw emotions coursing through me. He holds my gaze, his expression unreadable for a moment. He pushes back his chair and rises to his feet, closing the distance between us.

To my surprise, he kneels before me, taking my hand in his and giving it a warm, reassuring squeeze. His touch is gentle, starkly contrasting to his eyes' intensity as he searches my face.

"What you just told me... does it explain why you lack fighting skills?" he asks softly, his voice laced with understanding. I nod, swallowing past the lump in my throat.

"In a way. I didn't want to make things more difficult for everyone, so I never trained with them. My parents felt bad for me, so they let me spend that time doing what I enjoyed instead."

"Hmm, I see," he murmurs, releasing my hand and rising to his full height. He begins to pace the room, his brow furrowed in deep thought.

"Is everything alright?" I ask, watching him with a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

"Yeah," he assures me, spinning around and striding back to where I sit. He leans forward, his hands resting on the armrests of my chair, his face level with mine. "Tomorrow, I want you up by six o'clock."

I blink, taken aback by the sudden shift in topic. "Why?"

A fierce determination blazes in his eyes, and his next words

steal the breath from my lungs. "Because I am going to train you on how to kill every single bastard who dared to say a horrible thing about you."

My jaw drops, and I stare at him, shocked to my core. I'm at a loss for words, overwhelmed by the magnitude of his words. The fact that he wants to empower me, to teach me how to stand up for myself rather than simply fighting my battles for me...it moves me in a way I can't quite describe.

"Come on, let's get you to bed," he says gently, taking my hand and helping me to my feet. He leads me out of the room.

A small smile tugs at my lips as we walk, and a warmth blossoms in my chest. I can't help but feel that I made the right choice in confiding in him. His response, his desire to build me up and help me reclaim my strength...it's more than I could have hoped for.

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The sun hangs low in the sky, painting the horizon in hues of orange and pink as it prepares to give way to the encroaching night. In a clearing surrounded by towering trees, their leaves rustling in the strong gusts of wind, Nickolas and I face each other, both poised for combat.

I pant hard, my chest heaving with each labored breath. Strands of hair, having escaped the confines of my bun, cling to my sweat-drenched face while others dance wildly in the wind. I swing on my feet, hands raised and fisted, as if ready to strike. And I want to, I desperately want to land a punch on Nickolas, but I know he would see it coming a mile away and easily block it.

I push saliva down my raw throat, wiping sweat from my brow with the back of my hand. We have been training for hours now, and the toll on my body is evident. My muscles ache, and exhaustion threatens to overtake me at any moment. We've been training for hours now, and it's been absolute hell. Nickolas is the worst trainer on this earth, I'm convinced.

"Unmask and attack me again," he commands, his voice steady and unwavering. I stare at him for a moment, marveling at how he isn't nearly as winded as I am. His breath is even, and only the faintest sheen of sweat glistens on his skin while I feel like I'm doing all the work, and he's just standing there, cool and collected. "Amelia," he calls sharply, jolting me from my thoughts. I quickly do as he asks, feeling the changes ripple through my body. My

tongue darts out, grazing the sharp points of my elongated canines. I meet Nickolas's gaze, his eyes now glowing crimson, mirroring my own. "Protect yourself," he yells just before launching a punch directly at my face.

Instinctively, I lift my arm to block, a small thrill of victory surging through me as I deflect the blow. But the triumph is short-lived. In the next instant, Nickolas's other fist connects with my gut, knocking the wind out of me and sending me stumbling backward. "I told you, even a second is enough to kill you," he growls, using his vampire speed to get behind me, locking me in a chokehold.

I quickly lift my hands to his arm and try to pull it away as his hot breath fans my neck, sending shivers down my spine despite the adrenaline pumping through my veins. "One second, Amelia, and you're gone," he whispers, his lips brushing the shell of my ear as he traces a claw along my throat, applying just enough pressure to make his point without breaking skin. I feel my breath coming out in short pants, my body hyper-aware of his closeness. "Do you understand?" He spins me around to face him, his face just inches from mine as he yells. I blink, my mind going blank as I stare at his heaving chest glittering with sweat. I try to keep my hormones in check, but it's nearly impossible with him this close.

"Again," he commands huskily, stepping back and putting some distance between us.

I shake out my limbs, slapping my cheeks to refocus. I can do this. I can train with Nickolas without letting my mind wander to how it would feel to be wrapped in those strong arms of his, held tight against that firm chest...No. I forcefully shut down that train of thought. I need to concentrate, to prove to him and to myself that I can be strong, that I can fight. With a deep breath, I settle into a defensive stance, ready to face whatever he throws at me next.

"Attack me this time," Nickolas commands.

"Okay," I breathe, the word barely a whisper. I surge forward, putting all my strength behind a punch aimed at his jaw. He dodges with infuriating ease, his head tilting just out of reach. Undeterred, I swing again, my fist cutting through empty air as he catches my wrist in an iron grip.

Before I can blink, he yanks me forward, using my own momentum against me. The world tilts and blurs, and then my back slams into the ground, forcing the air from my lungs in a startled

gasp. Nickolas moves to pin me, but I'm ready for him. I hook my foot around his ankle and twist, sending him sprawling.

In a heartbeat, I'm on him, straddling his hips, my hands splayed across the broad expanse of his chest. I can feel the heat of his skin through the thin fabric of his shirt, the frantic pounding of his heart beneath my palm. "I think you can say I won this round," I pant, giddy with triumph and something else, something that coils hot and tight in my belly.

"I don't think so." Nickolas's eyes flash, and then he's moving, a blur of speed and strength.

The world spins dizzyingly, and suddenly, I find myself on my back, Nickolas's commanding presence looming over me. His weight presses deliciously against me, sending a jolt of anticipation coursing through my veins. My fingers instinctively clutch at his shirt, seeking stability amidst the sudden movement, while his sweat beads dripped onto my cheeks and lips, leaving a salty taste lingering in my mouth. His gaze, hot and hungry, sweeps over me, drinking in every detail with vigorous intensity. My chest rises and falls rapidly, the arch of my throat exposed as I swallow hard, feeling the heat of desire burning deep within his eyes mirrored in my own.

A smile tugs at my lips, unable to contain the rush of excitement that floods my senses. I'm not alone in this; not the only one consumed by the fire sparking between us. And with that knowledge, a mischievous spark ignites within me, a desire to ruffle Nickolas's composure even further.

My fingers tremble slightly as I loosen my grip on Nickolas's shirt, the fabric slipping from my grasp. Slowly, tentatively, I trail my fingertips down the hard planes of his chest, feeling the heat of his skin even through the thin barrier of cotton. His muscles tense and flex beneath my touch, and I can't resist the urge to explore further, to map out the ridges and valleys of his abs.

Nickolas sucks in a sharp breath, the sound hissing through his teeth. His eyes darken, pupils blown wide with desire, and the sight sends a thrill of power and wanting shuddering through me. Emboldened, I let my hand drift lower past the waistband of his pants. My claws extend, the tips grazing lightly over the sensitive skin just above his groin.

I hold his gaze as my hand hovers there, a silent question and a brazen invitation. Nickolas's fingers tighten on my waist, digging

into the soft flesh, and he gives me a warning look. But there's no real heat behind it, no true demand to stop. If anything, the hunger in his eyes only intensifies, a silent plea for more.

Permission granted, I slip my hand into his pants, my fingers curling around the hard length of him. He's hot and heavy in my palm, the skin like silk over steel. Nickolas's eyes slam shut, and he sucks in a ragged breath, his hips jerking forward involuntarily. I tighten my grip, reveling in the way he pulses and twitches against my hand.

"Amelia," he growls my name, a rumble of warning and want on his tongue. When they open, his eyes are nearly black with desire, and the green of his irises is a thin ring around blown pupils.

"Yes, Nickolas?" I breathe, stroking him slowly, teasingly. I want to watch him unravel, want to feel him come undone beneath my touch.

But before I can do more than give him a single, firm pump, Nickolas is grabbing my wrist and yanking my hand out of his pants. He's off me in a flash, on his feet, and turning away to adjust his dick in his pants to avoid showing how hard he is and standing with his back facing me.

I lay there on the ground, stunned and bereft, my hand still tingling with the feel of him. Confusion swirls through me, chased by the bitter sting of rejection. Did I do something wrong? Misread the signals?

"Nickolas," I call softly, pushing myself up to stand on shaky legs.

"It's 'Your Majesty to you," he snaps, the words a harsh bark that makes me flinch. Hurt and embarrassment flood through me, hot and sharp. I open my mouth, a question forming on my lips, but I'm cut off by the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Your Majesty." Lord Easterlin's voice rings out across the field as he draws near, bowing deeply before Nickolas. But as he straightens, his eyes catch mine, widening in shock.

My brows furrow, puzzled by the sudden widening of his eyes. I rack my brain, trying to discern what on my face could have elicited such a reaction from him, and then it hits me. My scent, my eyes...I hadn't masked them. Quickly, I turn away, hiding my face as I mask my scent. But it's too late. He saw, he knows. The question is, what will he do with that knowledge?

"Lord Easterlin," Nickolas calls, his voice commanding attention as he swiftly moves to stand in front of me, effectively blocking me

from Lord Easterlin's view.

"Your Majesty," Lord Easterlin responds, the color gradually returning to his face after having paled while staring at me.

Shit! I close my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose. This is not good. Not good at all.

"What has brought you here?"

"I have urgent matters to discuss," Lord Easterlin says, tilting his head to the side, trying to get another glimpse of me.

"Wait for me in my office. I will meet you there in a few minutes."

"As you wish, Your Majesty." He bows and turns to leave, but not before sneaking one last peek at me over Nickolas's shoulder.

I bite my nails, my mind racing with the possibilities of what would happen now that he saw my eyes and noticed the change in my scent. Vampires already whisper about my uncanny resemblance to the late queen. After what Lord Easterlin just witnessed, it would only take a second for him to put the pieces together, to realize what I truly am.

Panic claws at my throat. This is bad. Really, really bad. I was lucky Nickolas didn't try to use me to resurrect his father, but Lord Easterlin...he might not be so kind. What if he tries to drain me dry, to use my blood for his own gain? No, I can't let that happen. I need to hide, to run, to get as far away from here as possible.

I try to move my feet, but they're rooted to the spot, frozen with fear. "Amelia." Nickolas's voice cuts through the haze of terror, his hand gripping my arm. I lift my eyes to meet his, and the grim understanding I see there only confirms my worst fears. Nothing good can come from Lord Easterlin knowing my true identity. I'm doomed.

"I'm doomed," I whisper, my bottom lip quivering as tears fill my eyes, blurring my vision. The weight of the realization crashes over me, stealing the breath from my lungs.

"No, you're not," Nickolas says firmly, his gaze intense as it locks with mine. There's a fierceness there, a determination that catches me off guard.

Desperation claws at my throat, and I grab onto his shirt, my fingers twisting in the fabric. "Please don't let him use me. I'll die if he does. Please don't let that happen," I plead, the words tumbling out in a frantic rush. Tears slip down my cheeks, hot and stinging.

I know Nickolas doesn't care about me, not really. If Lord

Easterlin requests to use me for my gift, Nickolas won't refuse. He can't. And Lord Easterlin...he'll drain every last drop of blood from my body. The thought sends icy tendrils of fear curling through my veins.

"Amelia, what did I tell you yesterday?" Nickolas asks, his voice cutting through the haze of panic.

"Yesterday?" I repeat, my brow furrowing as I try to focus, to remember. How can something he said then possibly matter now in the face of this nightmare?

"I promised you that any fucking person that dares to lay a finger on you will face my wrath," he reminds me, his words slow and deliberate.

"Yes, you did," I acknowledge with a sniffle, searching his face, trying to understand where he's going with this. Nickolas reaches out, cupping my face in his warm palm. The touch is gentle grounding.

"Now I'm going to make you another promise."

"What promise?" I ask, my heart stuttering in my chest.

"I will never use you for your gift or let any motherfucker do so," he vows, his eyes blazing with conviction.

Shock ripples through me, stealing my breath. "Really?" I whisper, hardly daring to believe it.

"I mean it, Amelia. No one and I mean no fucking person on this earth, is taking a single drop of blood from you while I still breathe."

I suck in a shaky breath as his words sink in, as the full weight of his promise settles over me. I search his eyes, looking for any hint of a lie, but I find only sincerity burning bright. It's the same look he had yesterday when he made his first vow.

Wow. I can hardly reconcile this Nickolas with the one who barked at me to call him “Your Majesty” just minutes ago. It's like they're two different people. The whiplash is dizzying.

"Come on, we're done for today," he says, taking my hand and leading me back toward the castle.

I walk beside him, my mind reeling as I try to make sense of it all, of these promises that feel so real, so binding. What does it mean for us, for this strange, complicated thing between us? Are we still enemies, or something more? The lines are blurring, shifting beneath my feet, and I'm not sure anymore where we stand. But one thing is crystal clear—Nickolas's promises are not empty words.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

NICKOLAS

I steal a glance from the road, my eyes drawn to Amelia as she sits silently in the passenger seat of my sleek Bentley. Strands of her damp hair cling to her porcelain face, still wet from the rushed shower I had insisted she take. My own hair is barely dried, dark locks plastered against my forehead. I know she must be starving, her stomach hollow with hunger. But all of that has to wait. Her safety is the only thing that matters now.

She turns to look at me, baby blue eyes wide and searching as my fingers reach out to tuck an errant curl behind her ear. Those eyes tug at my heart, begging me to explain why I pulled her from the castle and now speed her away to some unknown destination. Sighing, I pull my hand back, gripping the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white. As much as it pains me to keep her in the dark, to see the confusion and hint of fear swirling in her gaze, I know it's for the best. She can't know where we're going or why. Not yet.

The Bentley purrs to a stop in the driveway of a stately two-story mansion. I climb out, and Amelia follows, her eyes growing even wider as she takes in the unfamiliar house looming before her, elegant and imposing. Grasping her small hand in mine, I lead her to the grand mahogany front doors and knock, the sound echoing through the quiet air.

A maid, close to Beatrice in age, opens the door, her welcoming smile faltering as she notices Amelia at my side, no doubt sensing the young werewolf's presence. Without a word, she steps aside, pulling the door open wider in silent invitation. She understands. A witch herself, she knows I would only dare bring Amelia here, to

this place, if the situation was truly dire.

"Where are they?" I ask brusquely as we step into the foyer.

"The living room," the maid replies softly before turning to walk away.

I tighten my grip on Amelia's hand, feeling her pulse flutter against my palm as I guide her to the living room. I sense her gaze on our joined hands and glance over to see her transfixed by the sight. Mere months ago, you would have literally had to cut off my hands if you wished to join them with hers. But now, I find myself loathe to let go as we walk, craving her touch, her closeness.

We enter the living room to find Aunt Ava and Uncle Leo on the couch, the flickering light of the TV playing across their faces. Amelia stiffens beside me, her grip on my hand becoming almost painful. I snake an arm around her slender waist and lean in close, my breath stirring the fine hairs by her ear.

"She won't lay a finger on you. Not while I'm here," I murmur, my voice low and fierce. I pull back to meet her eyes, willing her to see the truth, the promise in my words.

"Junior," Aunt Ava says, drawing my attention. I see the smile on her lips quickly fade as her eyes land on Amelia.

"Hello, Uncle, Aunt Ava." Uncle Leo looks away from the TV at the sound of my voice, his brow furrowing as he notices my unlikely companion.

"What's wrong?" he asks, switching off the television and focusing his full attention on us. My unannounced arrival with Amelia makes the gravity of the situation clear.

"Let's speak in your office."

"Of course, you know the way," Uncle Leo replies, rising from the couch. I turn to Amelia, grasping her shoulders gently.

"I need to talk to them, but I'll be right back," I assure her, guiding her to sit on the sofa. She nods, accepting but uneasy.

I start to follow my aunt and uncle from the room when I feel a tug on my shirt. Glancing back, I see Amelia's fingers twisted in the fabric, her blue eyes round and imploring.

"Please don't be long," she whispers, her voice small and vulnerable.

Bending down, I press a tender kiss to her forehead, breathing in the sweet scent of her freshly washed skin. "I promise."

I stride into my uncle's office. The sight that greets me isn't far from what I expected. Aunt Ava sits rigidly in her chair, her foot

tapping an angry staccato against the polished hardwood floor. Uncle Leo, in contrast, appears outwardly calm, his expression inscrutable as he waits for me to take a seat and explain the situation.

Steeling myself, I sink into the chair opposite Uncle Leo, acutely aware of Ava's seething presence beside me. The tension in the room is palpable. I can see this talk going very horribly, but hopefully, with my life and Amelia's safety on the line, it won't.

"Why the hell did you bring that animal into my home?" Ava snarls, her voice dripping with venom. The word "animal" sends a sharp pang through my chest, my jaw clenching with the effort to bite back a heated retort.

"Because you need to protect her," I reply evenly, rubbing my temple in a futile attempt to stave off the headache I can feel building behind my eyes. We've barely begun, and already Ava looks ready to tear me apart.

"What?" she screeches, her eyes flashing with disbelief and rage.

"Lord Easterlin knows," I say grimly, the words heavy on my tongue.

"Knows what?" Ava demands, her voice rising to a shrill pitch.

"About Amelia's gifts," I clarify.

"How?" This time, it's Uncle Leo who speaks, his tone filled with confusion.

I take a deep breath and launch into an explanation of the earlier events, my stomach twisting with each word. As I talk, I can see the gravity of the situation sinking in, their expressions morphing from disbelief to grim understanding.

"That is not good," Uncle Leo murmurs, his brow furrowed in thought.

"I know," I agree, leaning forward in my seat. "That's why I need Aunt Ava to watch over Amelia for the next few hours while I figure out a way to protect her from him."

"I'm not watching that animal," Ava spits, her lip curling in disgust. Once again, the insult toward Amelia sends a bolt of anger through me, my hands clenching into fists at my sides.

"Would you rather see me die, then?" I ask coldly, lifting a dark brow in challenge.

"Of course not," she replies, her voice softening slightly, but the underlying hostility remains.

"Then you are watching her while I handle business during the

day and figure out how to make him believe what he saw was fake," I state firmly, leaving no room for argument.

"How sure are you that he would even use her to revive your brother?" Ava questions, her tone skeptical. This is our best guess about what Lord Easterlin will do with Amelia's gifts.

"I think the fact that his daughter screwed up, costing him his chance at having more power, is enough reason to believe he would do anything to get rid of me," I counter, my voice hard with conviction.

"That's true," Uncle Leo concedes, his expression troubled. "And we couldn't find James' remains after the war."

"Yes, we couldn't," I agree, my mind racing with the implications. "And for all we know, he might have kept them hidden all this time, waiting for the day I won't honor my word."

"But you aren't refusing to marry Ember. She messed up," Ava argues, her brow furrowed in confusion. "It shouldn't make him want to revive that tyrant."

"I wish Lord Easterlin viewed it that way," I sigh, rubbing a hand over my face. "He might not have said it, but he believes his daughter hasn't done anything wrong by hurting Amelia, as she's an enemy to our kind. The only reason he offered to capture her for me was to save his coven. Nothing more."

"In a way, he's right," Ava says slowly, her words like a knife twisting in my gut. "You shouldn't have Ember running for her life because she hurt Amelia. She is the daughter of your father's murderer."

I feel something snap inside me, my temper flaring white-hot. "She disobeyed my orders and almost cost me my best chance at avenging my father's death, and you think she shouldn't be running for her life right now?" I seethe, my voice shaking with barely contained fury.

The memory of finding Amelia broken and bleeding, her body ravaged by Ember's cruelty, flashes through my mind. Even without the other factors, I would still demand Ember's head for hurting Amelia the way she did.

"That's true," Ava concedes, but her next words send a fresh wave of outrage crashing over me. "But I believe a death sentence isn't necessary."

"What?" I explode, staring at her in utter disbelief.

"Yes, maybe a little punishment, but not death," she continues,

oblivious to the rage boiling beneath my skin.

"Not death?" I repeat incredulously, my voice rising with each word. "I know you hate Amelia, but I never expected you to say what you just did."

"Why?" Ava asks, her expression genuinely puzzled.

"Because she hurt her!" I roar, slamming my fist down on the arm of the chair, the wood creaking in protest.

"And so did I," Ava points out, unfazed by my outburst. "I don't even understand why you care so much. It's not like you're real mates or something."

The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them, the truth ripped from some deep, hidden place inside me. "And what if we are?"

"What?" Uncle Leo and Ava exclaim in unison, their eyes wide with shock.

I push back from my chair and rise to my feet, my body thrumming with a strange mixture of anger, fear, and something else I can't quite name. All I know is that I need to get out of this room, away from their judging eyes and probing questions.

"Where do you think you're going?" Uncle Leo demands, jolting out of his seat to block my path to the door.

"To tell Amelia she'll be spending the day here," I reply tersely, reaching for the handle.

"You're not leaving this room until you explain the rubbish you just spurted out of your mouth," he insists, slamming the door shut with vampire speed.

"There is nothing to explain," I grit out, meeting his gaze head-on.

"You really think so?" he challenges, lifting a skeptical brow.

"Yes, there isn't," I maintain, my voice steady despite the turmoil raging inside me. "As you said, I spurted rubbish."

I brush past him, wrenching the door open and striding out into the hallway. As it closes behind me, I feel my shoulders slump, the weight of everything crashing down on me all at once. It's ironic, really. Eric would be thrilled by my inadvertent confession, but Uncle Leo looked as if I'd driven a stake through his heart.

Sighing heavily, I run a hand through my hair, trying to gather my scattered thoughts. As much as I'd like to unravel the tangled knot of emotions inside me to understand why those words slipped out so easily, I know there are more pressing matters at hand.

Squaring my shoulders, I make my way to the living room, determined to focus on the task of keeping Amelia safe. Everything else will have to wait.

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CHAPTER FORTY

The sound of my footsteps echoes through the dimly lit dungeon as I stride purposefully toward the center of the room. The air is thick with the coppery scent of blood and the weight of impending violence. I've just returned from saying goodbye to Amelia, who wasn't thrilled about staying with Ava but understood the necessity better than my aunt did. My plan is to quickly finish my business here and retrieve her later.

As I approach the center of the room, I find Lord Easterlin and a guard standing a few feet away from a man suspended from the ceiling. His body is a canvas of bruises and blood, the crimson liquid dripping steadily onto the stone floor below. This is the reason Lord Easterlin sought me out earlier while Amelia and I were training. He's doing everything in his power to convince me he's not in league with his daughter and to atone for his mistake in allowing her to slip away and nearly kidnap Amelia again.

"Patrol Officer Henry," I address the hanging man, moving closer until I'm standing directly in front of him. "You are quite the difficult man to find." I grab his chin roughly, my nails digging into his skin and eliciting a hiss of pain from his cracked lips.

"Please, spare me! I beg of you!" he pleads, his voice ragged with desperation. I can't help but laugh at his pathetic attempt to appeal to my mercy.

"To think I once believed you were a man of intelligence," I scoff, releasing his chin with a forceful shove that sends him swinging like a macabre pendulum.

"I did everything you asked! Why are you doing this to me?" he cries, his eyes wide with fear and confusion.

"Did he really just ask me that idiotic question?" I turn to Lord Easterlin and the guard, my eyebrows raised in disbelief. They both

shake their heads, tsking in disapproval.

“I don’t know where the king is, I swear! Please believe me!” Henry begs, his voice cracking with emotion.

“I would love to believe you, Henry, but unfortunately, we both know your word is worthless.” He helped us with the coup, but he withheld crucial information that has now come back to haunt us.

“What happened that day wasn’t my fault! I couldn’t have known some members of the royal family wouldn’t attend. You can’t blame me for not disclosing it to you earlier that night!” he argues, his tone bordering on indignant.

“You see, that’s where you’re wrong again.” I calmly unbutton my cuff and roll up my sleeves, exposing the corded muscles of my forearms. “You knew they weren’t going to attend, and you didn’t inform me, giving the werewolf king a chance to escape.” I reach into my pocket and pull out a silver ring, slipping it onto my finger. The metal gleams menacingly in the dim light. I clench my fist and deliver a vicious punch to Henry’s chin, snapping his head back and sending him swinging wildly. He screams in agony, the sound echoing off the stone walls. “For that, you will pay.” Another punch to the stomach, my knuckles sinking into the soft flesh and forcing the air from his lungs.

“Please, forgive me for my mistake, Your Majesty! I beg you!” Henry pleads, his eyes fixated on the silver whip I retrieve from the guard.

“First, I am going to—” My threat is cut short by the shrill ringing of my phone. Dropping the whip, I quickly fish the device from my pocket and answer, my heart suddenly racing with worry.

“Amelia, is everything alright?” I ask my voice tight with concern.

“I’m fine, I just—” Her response is interrupted by Lord Easterlin’s startled voice.

“Your Majesty?” he questions, his eyes wide with shock. It’s not surprising, considering I never bring my phone to interrogations.

“You were saying, Amelia?” I turn away from Lord Easterlin, giving her my full attention.

“I wanted to ask if you could have someone bring some of my books over. I’m dying of boredom,” she explains, her tone slightly sheepish.

“I apologize for that. I’ll have someone bring them to you as soon as possible.” I snap my fingers at the guard, beckoning him closer.

“Thank you. Goodbye,” Amelia says, a hint of excitement coloring her words.

“Bye, Amelia.” A small smile tugs at the corners of my mouth, a warmth spreading through my chest at the thought of her happiness.

I end the call and slip the phone back into my pocket, turning to give instructions to the guard. “Have Beatrice gather Amelia’s books and send them to my uncle’s place immediately.”

With that taken care of, I return my focus to Henry, ignoring the curious gaze of Lord Easterlin boring into my back.

“Henry, guess what? Today might be your lucky day,” I announce, watching as his eyes widen with a glimmer of hope.

“Do you know Princess Amelia?” I ask, my tone deceptively casual. He nods, his expression wary.

“What do you think of her?”

“She’s a bitch. A whore and a curse to the werewolf race. She deserves to die wherever she is,” he spits, his body trembling with barely contained rage.

“Hmm, interesting.” It seems he’s eager for a quicker death.

“So, you believe she’s a curse on the werewolf race?” I press, my voice dangerously soft.

“Yes,” he confirms, his jaw set in defiance.

“That’s interesting.”

“How, Your Majesty?” Lord Easterlin interjects from beside me.

“You see, speaking with Amelia just now put me in a good mood. I was thinking, if you weren’t one of the assholes who made her feel like trash growing up, I might have given you three chances to come clean about Nathaniel’s whereabouts and spared you the gruesome torture.” Henry’s eyes widen in horrified realization, the gravity of his mistake sinking in.

I lean in close, my face mere inches from his. “That’s right, Henry. Now, I’m going to take my precious time inflicting unimaginable pain on your already fragile body. I’ll make you regret every single vile word you uttered about Amelia.” Moving to whisper directly into his ear, I deliver my final promise. “By the time I’m finished with you, you’ll wish the only words that ever passed your fucking lips were praises for her.”

In a swift motion, I grab a small blade from the nearby table and return to Henry’s side. Grasping his tongue, I slice through the muscle in one clean stroke. He thrashes violently, screaming in

agony as blood pours from his mutilated mouth.

“I thought it best we start with that since you never knew how to use it properly,” I remark, flinging the severed tongue to the ground with a sickening splat. Circling behind him, I tear the tattered remains of his shirt from his body, exposing the expanse of his back. With meticulous precision, I carve the words “Amelia is the best in the world” into his flesh, a twisted smile stretching across my face as his blood flows freely, painting the floor a vivid crimson. “Magnificent,” I breathe, admiring my handiwork with a sense of dark satisfaction.

Returning to the table, I select a spiked whip, the metal barbs glinting in the dim light. I bring the weapon down on Henry’s skin again and again, reveling in the way his blood splatters across my face and hands, his screams of anguish a twisted symphony to my ears.

“For a werewolf, you don’t taste half bad,” I taunt, licking the coppery essence from my lips. I continue the relentless assault until my muscles burn with exertion.

“Your Majesty.” Lord Easterlin’s hand on my arm halts my next strike. I turn to face him, my chest heaving with the effort of my brutality. “He’s gone,” he informs me, his voice tinged with something akin to worry. I glance back at Henry’s lifeless form, only now noticing the stillness of his chest and the stark white of exposed bone peeking through the tattered remnants of his flesh. In my blind rage and bloodlust, I failed to realize the moment he slipped from this world. Dropping the whip to the ground, I take a deep, shuddering breath. Never before have I felt such a profound sense of satisfaction from inflicting torture. “We have a problem, Your Majesty,” Lord Easterlin says, his words cutting through the haze of my thoughts.

“What is it?” I ask, my voice sounding distant to my own ears.

“He didn’t reveal the werewolf king’s location before you killed him,” he points out, the realization hitting me like a physical blow. I was so consumed by the desire to make Henry pay for his words that I completely forgot our original purpose. I can’t believe I allowed myself to lose control like that.

“I knew he didn’t know where the king was. That’s why I killed him,” I lie, the words tasting bitter on my tongue.

“If you say so, Your Majesty.” Lord Easterlin’s tone makes it clear he doesn’t believe me, but he chooses not to press the issue.

“Tell the men to continue searching. This time, make sure the werewolf they find actually knows Nathaniel’s whereabouts,” I order, my voice regaining its usual authority.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” With a curt nod, Lord Easterlin follows me out of the dungeon.

I ascend the stairs to my room, my mind reeling with the events of the day. As soon as I cross the threshold, I strip off my blood-soaked shirt and close my eyes, taking a moment to collect myself. What the hell is happening to me? Amelia seems to be consuming my every thought and action. I don’t understand what’s come over me.

“Nickolas!” a scream pierces the air, causing my eyes to fly open in alarm. Spinning around, I find Amelia standing there, her eyes wide with terror.

Fuck. The one thing I never wanted her to discover about me has just been laid bare. I’m shirtless, my back exposed, and Amelia has seen the scars that mar my skin—scars that, as the vampire king, I shouldn’t possess.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Amelia stares at me, her eyes wide with shock as they roam over my scarred body, taking in the myriad of marks that crisscross my skin and the fresh blood of Henry's that paints me in a gruesome tableau. I can practically hear the thoughts racing through her mind. Disgusting. Ugly. He must have done something to deserve it. Thank heavens, we're enemies; otherwise, I'd be stuck with someone so repulsive. My heart clenches painfully in my chest, knowing with absolute certainty that those are the thoughts consuming her. Even if we weren't enemies, my scars would have ensured we never ended up together.

"Who hurt you?" Amelia's voice cuts through my spiraling thoughts, snapping me back to the present. She takes a step closer, tears glistening in her eyes, and I feel a surge of anger and betrayal. She's mocking me, pretending to care when I know she doesn't feel an ounce of genuine concern. It's all a lie, a cruel joke at my expense, and it hurts more than I ever thought possible. I know we're not a couple, but I had hoped she would at least have the decency not to toy with me like this.

"I think you should leave, Amelia," I say, my voice cold and devoid of emotion, a stark contrast to the tempest raging inside me. She halts mid-step, her eyes widening at my icy tone, but she chooses to ignore my request, continuing to advance toward me.

I suck in a sharp breath as her scent envelops me, filling my nostrils with its intoxicating sweetness. It's the most amazing thing I've ever encountered, but right now, I would give anything to be free of it, to escape the way it makes my traitorous heart ache.

"Does it still hurt?" Amelia asks softly, her hand slowly lifting to

trace one of the scars on my chest. Before her fingers can make contact, I catch her wrist in a bruising grip, stopping her. She raises her gaze to meet mine, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears, and I feel a fresh wave of anger wash over me.

"I asked you to leave," I growl, my voice rough with barely contained fury. I'm done with her pretense, her false concern. I tug her roughly toward the door, intent on putting an end to this charade.

"Nickolas, I—" she starts, but I cut her off, slamming the door in her face with a resounding bang. She's mocked me enough, and I refuse to endure another second of her lies.

Leaning heavily against the door, I close my eyes, trying to steady my racing heart. I know things couldn't have played out any differently, but for some inexplicable reason, my chest feels tight, a dull ache settling behind my ribs. I tell myself it's for the best, that her reaction only confirms what I've always known—that I'm unlovable, unworthy of affection or compassion. But even as I repeat those words like a mantra, I can't shake the feeling of loss, the sense that something precious has slipped through my fingers, never to be reclaimed.

AMELIA

I stare unseeingly out the window, my unfocused gaze fixed on the vibrant garden below, a kaleidoscope of color that fails to penetrate the gray haze of my thoughts. The birds flit from branch to branch, their carefree songs a mocking counterpoint to the heaviness in my chest. It's been days since Nickolas banished me to Ava and Leo's mansion. I was only meant to be here when Nickolas was working and too busy to watch over me, but after the night I stumbled upon the truth etched into his skin, he moved me here, and I haven’t seen him since. That day, he was supposed to pick me up when he was done with his affairs, but Ava was heading to the castle, so she decided to bring me along to save him the trouble. If only she knew she should have left me at her house.

I know he's avoiding me because of what I saw, but I can't fathom why. Yes, the sight of his scars was shocking, not something one expects to encounter. But it wasn't repulsive or horrifying to me —if anything, it filled me with a burning need to understand, to know the story behind those brutal markings. Yet Nickolas reacted with anger, lashing out and forcibly removing me from his presence

as if I had committed some grave offense.

I've tried calling him, borrowing Ava's phone in a desperate attempt to reach out to bridge this ever-widening chasm between us. But each time he hears my voice, the line goes dead, the connection severed as abruptly as his temper flared that fateful night. I'm left with the inescapable feeling that I did something unforgivably wrong, though, for the life of me, I can't discern what transgression could have warranted such an ire.

The questions plague me, a constant undercurrent to my thoughts. How did the mighty vampire king, blessed with preternatural healing abilities than werewolves, come to bear such scars? What tragedy could have marred that perfect skin in so permanent a way? I feel I deserve to know that I have a right to the truth after everything we've been through. But with Nickolas stubbornly keeping me at arm's length, I fear the answers may forever remain a mystery.

Worse than the unanswered questions is the longing that threatens to tear me apart from the inside out. I ache for him with a fierceness that steals my breath away, a visceral pain that courses through every fiber of my being. I yearn for the way his scent wraps around me, deep and enticing, lingering on my skin even after he's gone. I crave the rough tenderness of his touch, how it ignites a blazing fire within me with the slightest caress. I even yearn for the sight of his dark brows arching in that infuriatingly attractive display of arrogance whenever I manage to catch him off guard.

"You miss him," Marie's voice echoes through my mind, her tone laced with sympathy.

"No, I don't," I deny reflexively, even as my heart betrays the lie.

"Then explain why you long for him," she challenges, a hint of amusement coloring her tone.

"I...I don't know," I admit with a helpless shrug. "I just...I don't know."

"You do know," Marie counters, her voice soft but insistent. "You just don't want to admit it because of who he is. And that's okay, Amelia. It's understandable."

"There's nothing to admit," I argue, a defensive edge creeping into my voice. "I may long for him, but that doesn't mean I miss him."

Marie's laughter fills my mind, rich, warm, and tinged with exasperation. "Oh, Amelia. You never cease to amaze me."

"What do you mean?" I ask, my brow furrowing in confusion.

"You're saying that longing for someone isn't the same as missing them," she explains as if speaking to a particularly dense child.

"Yes!" I insist, nodding emphatically even though she can't see the gesture.

"Oh, heavens above," Marie groans, and I can picture her dropping her furry head into her paws in exasperation.

"Marie..." I start warningly, sensing a lecture on the horizon.

"Amelia," she cuts me off, her tone brooking no argument. "Why must you make this so complicated? You're essentially saying the same thing with different words."

"I am not!" I protest, crossing my arms defensively over my chest. "I'm simply saying that—"

"That you long for someone you don't miss?" Marie interjects, her words laced with gentle mockery. "Even I, a simple animal, know that makes no sense whatsoever."

I fall silent then, letting her words sink in. Do I truly miss Nickolas? The thought is equal parts thrilling and terrifying, and my heart clenches painfully in my chest. Marie is right, I can't long for someone without also missing their presence in my life. I never imagined I would come to feel this way about the arrogant vampire king, my sworn enemy. Yet here I am, aching for him with every fiber of my being.

"I never thought I would feel this way about him," I whisper, more to myself than to Marie.

"It's understandable, Amelia," she replies, her mental voice soft with sympathy. "Nickolas is the enemy. You weren't expecting to feel anything for him other than hatred and disdain."

"Does this mean I've accepted the mate bond?" I ask, a tremor of fear running through me at the thought. "That I want a future with him, like you do?"

"I can't say for certain," Marie replies, her voice thoughtful. "But I do know that if things don't change, if this distance between you remains, your heart will cry out for him with every beat. And it won't be because of the bond but because of the feelings you've developed for him."

A gasping sob escapes my lips before I can stifle it, my hand flying up to cover my traitorous mouth. Because I know she's right. This longing, this ache that consumes me, it's not the mate bond. It's about the man himself, the one who has somehow carved a place

for himself in my heart, even as he remains my greatest enemy.

"I'll leave you to your thoughts," Marie murmurs, sensing my need for solitude. "Take care, my human."

Even though she can't see me, I nod and take a shuddering breath as her presence fades from my mind. I turn back to the window, my gaze once again drawn to the garden below, but I no longer see the beauty of the flowers or hear the song of the birds. I wrestle with the realization of what—or rather who—my heart desires most. I long for Nickolas with every fiber of my being, crave his presence like I've never wanted anything before in my life. But is that a good thing? He is still my enemy, still intent on destroying my father and my people. Can I truly give in to these dangerous feelings? Do I even have a choice in the matter?

A part of me thinks this forced separation may be for the best. With Nickolas keeping his distance, perhaps I can strangle these tender shots of affection before they take root too deeply. But another, quieter voice whispers that it's already too late, that I've crossed a line I can never uncross. That no matter how firmly I try to deny it, a part of me will always, irrevocably, belong to him.

I don't know if I'm ready to accept that reality or if I'll ever be able to reconcile the warring halves of my heart and soul. All I know is that something vital is missing with Nickolas gone from my life, and I can't even tell if I wouldn't do anything, give up everything, simply to remain by his side forever.

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CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

The following day, I make my way downstairs to the dining room for breakfast with Ava and Leo. Leo doesn’t have to eat, being a vampire, but he chooses to do so because he doesn’t want Ava to ever have to eat alone. I find it heartwarming that he would do something so small yet meaningful for her. I pause at the entrance, my breath catching in my throat at the sight of an unexpected figure occupying the seat beside my usual place. Even from behind, I would know that proud tilt of the head, those broad shoulders anywhere. Nickolas.

He turns at the sound of my approach, his expression as unreadable as ever, those green eyes giving nothing away. I search his face desperately for any hint that he's missed me these past few days as fiercely as I've missed him, but his features remain an impassive mask. Swallowing hard, I force my leaden feet to carry me forward until I sink into my chair, the silence between us stretching taut as a bowstring.

Nickolas doesn't speak, doesn't even acknowledge my presence beyond that initial glance. He simply continues eating, every movement precise and controlled. Hunger finally propels me to reach for the basket of bagels, my fingers brushing against his calloused skin as we both go for the same one. That familiar spark of electricity arcs between us, raising the fine hairs on my arms.

We turn to face each other, a charged silence enveloping us as our eyes lock in a silent exchange. In that moment, it feels as though our souls are laid bare, each of us yearning to unravel the mysteries hidden behind the facade we present to the world.

My gaze pierces through the void in his eyes, a silent plea

echoing in the depths of my being, begging him to let me in, to reveal the real Nickolas that lies beneath the surface. I ache to know if he feels the same longing and emptiness that gnaws at my heart in his absence.

A glimmer of emotion flickers within his eyes for a fleeting instant, igniting a spark of hope within me. But as quickly as it appears, it vanishes, leaving behind only the cold mask of indifference that shrouds his true feelings.

With a resigned sigh, I turn away, the ache in my heart growing heavier with each passing moment. Filling my plate with berries, I bury my emotions beneath a facade of indifference, silently lamenting the distance that still separates us.

"Why are you here?" The words tumble from my lips before I can stop them, a desperate plea for reassurance that he's come for me, even though I know better than to hope.

"I have business to discuss with Uncle Leo," he replies, his tone as flat and emotionless as ever.

"Hmm." The sound is little more than an exhale, a feeble attempt to mask the way my heart clenches at his words. Of course, he's not here for me. What was I thinking?

"Have you heard from Eric lately?" I ask, grasping at straws to fill the suffocating silence.

In an instant, the air crackles with tension, Nickolas's entire body going rigid at the mention of his friend's name.

"Why are you asking about Eric?" he demands, his voice edged with a dangerous sharpness that sends a shiver down my spine.

"Because I miss him, and—" My words are cut off as Nickolas's hand shoots out to grasp my wrist, his grip punishingly tight as he wrenches me around to face him.

"You miss him?" he seethes, his eyes blazing with an intensity that steals my breath.

"Nick..." Leo's warning falls on deaf ears as Nickolas hauls me bodily from my chair, dragging me from the room with vampire speed.

We come to an abrupt halt in the kitchen, the maids scattering like frightened mice at Nickolas's bellow for them to leave. His fury rolls off him in waves, the air practically crackling with it as he rounds on me, his chest heaving.

"Nick, what—" I start, but his hand slams into the door beside my head, the wood splintering beneath the force of the blow. I flinch

violently, my eyes squeezing shut as a jolt of fear lances through me.

"Open your fucking eyes," he snarls, his face mere inches from mine. I can feel the heat of his ragged breaths fanning across my skin, smell the sharp tang of his anger mingling with that intoxicating scent that is uniquely him.

"Your Majesty, is everything alright?" I ask, my voice trembling despite my efforts to remain calm. "Did I do something wrong?"

"When was the last time you saw me?" he demands.

"Huh?" I blink at him, utterly bewildered by the seeming non-sequitur.

"Answer the damn question, Amelia!" he roars, punctuating his words with another vicious strike against the door.

"Two weeks," I reply automatically, my mind racing to understand what could have provoked such a violent reaction.

"Two weeks," he echoes, his lip curling in a sneer. "Then why the fuck are you asking about Eric?"

"As I said, I'm—"

"I swear to the heavens, if you say you miss him one more time, I will make sure you never see him again," Nickolas cuts me off, his words dripping with menace.

I snap my mouth shut, my teeth sinking into my lower lip as I struggle to make sense of his outburst. What does Eric have to do with any of this?

"He's jealous, Amelia," Marie's voice whispers in my mind, understanding dawning like a bolt of lightning.

"What? Impossible," I argue, even as my heart gives a hopeful little flutter.

"Think about it," she presses gently. "He's completely unraveled over you saying you miss Eric. What other explanation could there be?"

I fall silent, turning Marie's words over and over as I study Nickolas's face, his eyes burning with an intensity I've never seen before. After a minute, I gather my courage and decide to take a leap of faith to test her words. Slowly, cautiously, I lift my hand to rest against the hard plane of his chest, feeling the frantic staccato of his heartbeat beneath my palm.

"I missed you more," I confess, my gaze flickering between his chiseled chest and those green eyes, trying to gauge his reaction. Beneath my palm, I feel the frantic pounding of his heart gradually

slow to a steadier rhythm, the tension draining from his body as my words sink in.

Nickolas releases a shuddering breath, the sound ragged and raw in the charged silence between us. As he stares down at me, I'm struck by the vulnerability etched into every line of his face, the naked emotion that transforms his features into something achingly beautiful and utterly foreign. In all the time I've known him, I've never seen him this open, this exposed.

"These past few days were the hardest of my existence," he rasps, his normally smooth voice roughened by the intensity of his feelings. "My soul craved you with every passing second, Amelia. It was like a physical ache, a yawning emptiness that only your presence could fill."

The words seem to catch in his throat as if the admission is being dragged from somewhere deep inside him, a place he rarely allows anyone to glimpse. I can practically feel the effort it takes for him to voice those thoughts aloud, each syllable weighted with a significance I can scarcely comprehend.

I’m stunned by his confession, hardly daring to believe that this proud, guarded man could feel so deeply for me. That the connection between us could affect him on such a profound level.

His arm bands around my waist, hauling me flush against the solid wall of his body. His scent surrounds me, rich and heady, and I can't help but sway toward him, drawn like a moth to a flame. I trail my hands up over the hard planes of his chest to loop around the back of his neck, rising up on my tiptoes to bring our faces achingly close.

This is madness, a voice whispers in the back of my mind. He's your enemy, the one who wants to destroy everything you are. But I can't bring myself to care, not when his eyes are burning into mine with such naked longing, not when the heat of his body is searing me from the inside out.

Nickolas's arm tightens around me, pulling me even closer until our bodies are flush, his breath fanning hot across my parted lips. My eyes drift shut of their own accord as I wait with bated breath for the kiss I've been craving since the moment we met.

The sudden clatter of a bowl hitting the floor has my eyes flying open in shock. A young maid stands frozen in the doorway, her eyes wide and face flushed a deep crimson.

"Oh! Heavens, I'm so sorry!" she gasps, spinning on her heel and

fleeing from the room.

In an instant, the spell is broken. Nickolas's arm falls away from my waist as he takes a hasty step back, putting distance between us once more. I glance around the kitchen, my teeth worrying my lower lip as I wrestle with indecision. Should I close the gap between us again or make another attempt? Or should I wait for him to make the next move?

Biting down harder, I make my choice. I take a single step forward, my heart pounding in my ears. But Nickolas merely shakes his head, his expression unreadable as he backs away, turning on his heel to stalk from the room without a backward glance.

The breath leaves my lungs in a harsh sob as I watch him go, a physical ache blossoming in my chest. That shake of his head, that simple gesture—it can only mean one thing. He regrets whatever happened between us, regrets letting things go so far.

Tears prick hot at the corners of my eyes as I realize just how foolish I've been. Of course he would never want to kiss me, to let whatever this is between us progress any further. I'm still his enemy, still the one whose entire existence is anathema to his goals and beliefs. For a fleeting moment, I allowed myself to think that maybe, just maybe, he felt the same soul-deep craving, the same bone-deep longing that consumes me whenever we're apart. But I was wrong. So very wrong.

A scream of anguish and frustration tears from my throat as I throw my head back, the sound echoing off the tiled walls. Fuck! How could I have been so stupid? So naive as to think Nickolas could ever want me as more than a means to an end, a way to satisfy the demands of the mate bond? Of course, that's all this is to him—a biological imperative, not a joining of hearts and souls.

Swiping angrily at the tears streaking down my cheeks, I turn on my heel and storm from the kitchen, making a beeline for the sanctuary of my room. I'll spend the rest of the day holed up there, licking my wounds and trying to rebuild the tattered remnants of my pride. And I'll vow, yet again, to guard my heart more carefully in the future—or what's left of it, at least. Because no matter how I try to deny it, a piece of it will forever belong to Nickolas, and that terrifies me more than anything.

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CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

I jolt awake, my skin slick with sweat. The air in my room is thick and heavy, the heat pressing down on me like a physical weight. Blinking away the last vestiges of sleep, my eyes widen in horror as I take in the sight before me—roaring flames licking at the walls, devouring everything in their path.

Panic seizes me, a scream lodging in my throat as I stumble from the bed, coughing and choking on the acrid smoke that fills my lungs with every gasping breath. The fire seems to have originated in the closet, the flames climbing higher and higher with each passing second. I can't begin to fathom how this nightmare started.

I lurch toward the door, my only thought to escape, to flee the inferno that threatens to consume me. But as my fingers close around the handle, a blinding white light explodes through the room, the force of it sending me flying backward. I crash into the vanity table, the glass shattering beneath my weight as I crumple to the floor in a heap of limbs and blood-soaked silk.

Pain lances through my back and side, a searing agony that steals the breath from my lungs. I press a trembling hand to my waist, feeling the slick heat of blood coating my fingers, and a wave of dizziness washes over me. This is bad. This is really, really bad.

"Amelia! Amelia, can you hear me?" a voice shouts from the other side of the door, the words barely audible over the roar of the flames.

"Ye-ss," I choke out, covering my nose and mouth with the back of my hand in a futile attempt to filter the smoke. I stagger to my feet, clutching at my wounded side as I survey my burning room with growing desperation.

"Do not attempt to open the door again or the windows. Do you hear me?" The voice—Ava's voice, I realize with a jolt, is sharp with urgency, laced with an undercurrent of fear that sends a chill down my spine. If Ava is scared, then something is definitely not right.

"Okay, but why?" I rasp, stumbling away from the vanity and toward the bed. As I watch in mute horror, the flames begin to lick at the sheets, the fabric blackening and curling as the fire devours it inch by inch.

"The spell preventing foreigners from getting in has activated its fail-safe to protect you," Ava explains rapidly, her words tumbling over each other in her haste. "But in doing so, it's going to kill you. I'm working on undoing the spell, but I need you to stay put. Trying to escape will only make it harder."

"Okay," I wheeze, doubling over as another coughing fit wracks my body. The smoke is getting thicker by the second, the heat more intense, and I can feel my consciousness starting to waver at the edges. "Please hurry."

I clamber onto the bed, huddling against the headboard as far from the encroaching flames as I can get. My dress clings to my skin, soaked through with sweat and blood, and I can't stop the terrified whimper that escapes my lips as I watch the fire inch ever closer. Is this how it ends? Burned alive in my own bed, helpless to do anything but wait for death to claim me?

"Amelia?" a new voice calls out, barely audible over the roar of the blaze. I don't respond, too lost in the waking nightmare to process anything beyond the terror gripping me. "Amelia!" the voice tries again, more insistent this time. "I can hear your heartbeat, little one. You need to calm down. Everything is going to be alright."

I whip my head toward the door at the achingly familiar timbre, tears of relief and fear streaking down my smoke-stained cheeks. "Nickolas?" I croak, my voice little more than a broken whisper.

How is this happening? One minute, I'm going to bed with a shattered heart, convinced any future with Nickolas is an impossible dream. The next, I'm staring death in the face, trapped in the hellish embrace of these all-consuming flames. I don't understand. I can't make sense of any of it.

"Close your eyes, Amelia," Nickolas instructs, his tone gentle but firm. "Remember my scent. Focus on that and nothing else. Everything will be alright, I promise."

"Okay," I sniffle, drawing my knees up to my chest and squeezing my eyes shut. Blocking out the roar of the fire and the sting of smoke, I let my mind drift, picturing Nickolas as clearly as if he were right in front of me. The rich, forest notes of his scent wrap around me like a protective cocoon. Gradually, I feel my racing heart begin to slow, my breathing evening out as I lose myself in thoughts of him.

"That's it, little one. Just breathe," Nickolas murmurs, and I can hear the relief in his voice. "You're going to be okay." But a second later, a loud crack rends the air, followed by the sound of splintering wood. My eyes fly open just in time to see one of the ceiling beams crash to the floor, wreathed in flames. A scream tears from my throat, my momentary calm shattered as the reality of my situation comes rushing back in devastating clarity.

I squeeze my eyes shut again, trying desperately to block out the sight of the burning room and the sound of Ava's frantic chanting from beyond the door. I don't know how much longer I can last like this, trapped and helpless, waiting for a rescue that might never come.

And then, as suddenly as it began, the chanting stops. The silence that follows is deafening, broken only by the crackle of the flames and the pounding of my own heart. Slowly, hardly daring to breathe, I open my eyes—only to find myself staring into the triumphant face of my worst nightmare.

"Hello, princess," Ember purrs, her hand clamping down on my wrist in a bruising grip. I whip my head toward the sound of her voice to find her standing at the foot of my bed, flanked by two hooded figures—witches if their scents are any indication. But it's the shimmering portal of water hovering behind them that makes my blood run cold, a yawning vortex that fills me with a primal terror.

The door to my room explodes inward with a deafening crash of splintering wood. Nickolas and Ava spill into the room with matching expressions of horror. But before either of them can react, Ember is barking out orders, her voice laced with dark glee as she urges the witches into action.

I don't try to make sense of how they breached the wards. My only thought is to get away, to put as much distance between myself and that portal as possible. Wrenching my arm free of Ember's grasp, I turn and run, my bare feet slapping against the

hardwood as I make a desperate bid for Nickolas's side. But I've only taken a single step when something coils around my wrists, biting deep with razor-sharp fangs.

I stumble, my forward momentum arrested as I'm jerked back violently. A scream tears from my throat as I take in the wicked chains now wrapped around my arms, each link studded with vicious metal spikes that have punched through flesh and bone alike.

"Come here, you bitch," Ember snarls, giving the chains a vicious yank.

White-hot agony lances through me as the barbs dig deeper, scoring my bones and shredding muscle. But I grit my teeth, refusing to give her the satisfaction of hearing me scream again as I brace my feet and pull back with everything I have.

We grapple for control, my blood quickly soaking the floor as I'm driven inexorably backward, inch by agonizing inch. The pain is a living thing, a sentient force that steals my breath and clouds my vision until all I can perceive is the relentless ache radiating from my mangled wrists.

Then, a new torment joins the fray as another chain, thicker and more wicked than the first, bursts through the wound in my side. I can't stifle the scream that rips from my ravaged throat this time, a guttural sound of pure, unadulterated anguish as the barbs sink into the torn flesh of my abdomen.

Ember cackles, her face alight with sadistic glee as she uses my moment of weakness to haul me closer to the portal's hungry maw. I can feel its pull now, an inexorable force trying to drag me into that watery abyss. But I can't go, I won't. Not while I still have breath in my lungs and fight left in my battered body, but it's a losing battle. Inch by inch, she pulls me forward until only my head and shoulders remain on this side of the shimmering veil.

Through the haze of agony, I catch a glimpse of Nickolas in the midst of the chaos. He's engaged in a vicious duel with one of the witches, her hands wreathed in flame as she hurls gouts of fire at him. But Nickolas is inexorable, shrugging off the scorching blasts as if they're little more than a mild annoyance.

I can only watch, frozen in horror, as he closes in on the witch with terrifying speed. His claws are out, glinting like razors in the flickering light, and then they're sinking into the soft flesh of her chest with sickening ease. The witch's eyes bulge, her mouth

opening in a soundless scream as Nickolas rips out her still-beating heart, his arm instantly engulfed in roaring flames.

"Nickolas!" I shriek, my voice cracking with terror and anguish as I watch him burn.

Ember takes advantage of my distraction, her grip tightening like a vise as she wrenches me fully through the portal. I catch one last glimpse of Nickolas, his eyes wide and wild as he rushes toward the closing vortex.

"I will come for you, Amelia!" he roars, the words ringing in my ears like an oath. "Even if I have to burn the whole world, I promise I'll find you!"

Then the portal winks out of existence, and I'm swallowed by darkness so complete, so absolute, that I wonder if I've finally slipped into the endless embrace of death itself.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

I blink rapidly, trying to make sense of my surroundings, but there's nothing to see. The darkness is absolute, a thick, inky blackness that seems to swallow me whole. Ember's grip on my arm has vanished, along with the heat of her body. Fear claws at my throat as the reality of my situation sinks in—I've been kidnapped, dragged through that shimmering portal to heavens knows where.

A scream rips from my lungs as something unseen yanks my feet out from under me. I brace for impact, expecting to crash to the ground in a tangle of limbs, but instead, I land heavily in a wooden chair that seems to materialize out of thin air. My head whips around, searching frantically for the source of this sorcery, but there's nothing, no one. Just the endless dark and the frantic pounding of my own heart.

Cold metal bites into the tender skin of my wrists as restraints snake around them, binding me to the chair with brutal efficiency. The work of an earth witch, I realize with a sinking dread. They're notorious for their ability to manipulate metal, to bend it to their will as easily as breathing.

A puff of icy breath ghosts across the nape of my neck, raising goosebumps on my sweat-slicked skin. I go rigid, every muscle locking up as pure, undiluted terror floods my veins. The torture is about to begin. I can feel it in the marrow of my bones, a certainty as cold and unyielding as the metal encircling my wrists.

"Hello, princess," a voice purrs, the words dripping with malice. It's familiar, achingly so, but in my panic, I can't place it. I turn my head to the right, desperately trying to catch a glimpse of my captor, but he's gone, melting back into the shadows as if he were

never there at all.

A gust of frigid air washes over me, so cold it feels like needles piercing my skin. I shiver violently, the chair creaking as I thrash against my bonds. There's something in the wind, something dark and hungry, and I can feel it slithering through my veins like poison. I suck in a shuddering breath, forcing the air past the knot of fear in my throat. I have to stay calm, to keep my wits about me if I'm going to find a way out of this nightmare.

"Whatever you're planning to do to me, I strongly advise against it," I say, hoping my voice doesn't betray the terror coursing through my veins. I unmask my scent, and a hiss escapes my lips, causing me to look down at the bonds. They laced them with oak tree venom. They are more prepared for me than I thought.

"Why? Because Nickolas will burn the world to find me if I harm you?" my captor mocks, his voice dripping with disdain as he throws Nickolas's promise back in my face.

"Yes," I snap, seizing on the idea like a lifeline. "He will. So I advise you to heed my warning and return me to him before he razes everything you hold dear to the ground."

I try to infuse my words with as much conviction as I can muster, hoping to use Nickolas's reputation as a weapon to strike fear into the heart of whoever is working with Ember. But even as I speak, I can feel the icy tendrils of dread curling in my gut, the sinister presence in the room growing stronger by the second.

"I'm afraid I won't be doing that, princess," he says, his tone almost apologetic, as if he regrets disappointing me. Then he's here, materializing out of the gloom like a wraith. His hand closes around my throat, the icy flesh searing my skin as he squeezes, cutting off my air with ruthless efficiency.

"Lord Easterlin," I choke out, my eyes widening in horrified recognition. I knew I recognized that voice, but the reality of my situation crashes over me like a tidal wave, drowning me in despair. If Ember's father has me, then there's no telling what fresh hells await me.

"They say your blood is the sweetest thing ever," he muses, his grip tightening until spots dance before my eyes. I thrash wildly, clawing at his arm on the chair as I fight for breath, but it's like trying to move a mountain. Immovable. Implacable.

"Stop," I gasp as the pressure builds in my skull, my lungs screaming for air.

"I wonder what it would taste like," he continues as if I hadn't spoken at all. His tongue darts out to wet his lips, his eyes glowing with a feral, ravenous hunger that turns my blood to ice water in my veins.

"Stay the hell away from me," I scream, my voice barely more than a broken rasp, the authority in my words belied by the tremor in my voice.

"Why don't I have a taste?" he purrs, releasing my throat only to sink his claws into the tender flesh of my neck.

A hiss escapes my lips as his talons pierce my skin, blood pouring from the wounds to soak the front of my dress. Easterlin swipes a finger through the crimson rivulets, bringing it to his mouth to suck it clean with an obscene moan of pleasure.

"I knew you'd taste divine," he growls, his eyes flashing red, fangs glinting in the darkness.

I scream, thrashing against my bonds with a strength born of sheer, mind-numbing terror as his fangs sink deep into my neck. The pain is excruciating, a white-hot agony that sears through every nerve ending as he begins to drink, pulling the very life from my veins in great, greedy gulps.

I tug at the restraints binding my hands, a desperate struggle to break free and wrench him away from me as I feel the life being drained from my body with each passing moment. The urgency of survival surges through me, overriding any semblance of fear or pain as I fight against the suffocating grip of death looming ever closer.

I feel myself weakening, my struggles growing feeble as the world begins to fade at the edges. My hands fall limp at my sides, my head lolling back against the chair as a leaden heaviness seeps into my bones. He's killing me, draining me dry.

Just as I'm certain he's about to end me, Easterlin pulls back with a wet, satisfied smack of his lips. "Aha!" he crows, grinning down at me with a mouth-stained crimson, my blood dripping from his chin. "Exquisite."

I slump in the chair, my chest rising and falling in shallow, labored breaths as I fight to cling to consciousness. It takes every ounce of my remaining strength to force my eyes open, to meet his gloating stare with defiance.

"You'll never get what you want," I rasp, the words like broken glass in my throat.

"And why is that, my dear?" he asks, cocking his head in mock curiosity. "I have you, don't I?"

"You may have me," I whisper, the darkness creeping in at the edges of my vision, "but you'll never be king."

And with that, I let the void take me, slipping into the blessed embrace of unconsciousness, Easterlin's roar of fury chasing me down into the abyss.

NICKOLAS

"How could this happen? How could you fucking let this happen?" I roar, my voice raw with fury and desperation as I pace the living room like a caged animal, my hands clenching and unclenching at my sides.

"You think I let this happen?" Ava screams back, her face twisted with indignation and hurt.

"Don't you dare fucking raise your voice at me," I snarl, whirling on her with a ferocity that has her taking an involuntary step back. I loom over her, my body vibrating with barely contained rage, and for a moment, I see a flicker of fear in her eyes.

"And if I do, what will you do to me?" she challenges, lifting her chin defiantly as she tries to match my stance, but even at her full height, she barely reaches my chest. I glare down at her, my fists clenching so hard I can feel my nails biting into my palms, drawing blood. She knows I won't lay a hand on her, that my love for her stays in my hand even in the darkest of moments, and the knowledge only fuels my impotent fury.

"I think the two of you need to take a seat," Uncle Leo says, his voice calm but firm as he steps between us, placing a hand on each of our chests. I drop my gaze to the hand resting over my heart, feeling the steady thrum of my pulse beneath his palm before lifting my eyes to meet his. The look he gives me is equal parts understanding and pleading, silently begging me to rein in my temper.

With a huff of frustration, I stalk to the other end of the room, dropping into a chair with enough force to make the wood creak in protest. Uncle Leo guides Ava to a seat across from me, his touch gentle but insistent.

"Good. Now that you're both seated, we can begin," he says, his tone brooking no argument.

"How was Ember able to portal into Amelia's room?" I ask.

"I think you know the answer to that," Ava replies, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

I shoot her a venomous glare, my hands tightening on the armrests until my knuckles turn white. Uncle Leo catches my eye, mouthing a silent plea for forgiveness, and it takes every ounce of my self-control not to snap the fragile wood beneath my fingers.

Tearing my gaze away from Ava, I focus on Uncle Leo, my jaw clenched so tight I can feel my teeth grinding together. "I know she was able to portal in because you undid the spell," I grit out, each word feeling like broken glass in my throat. "But how did she know you were undoing it? How did she time her arrival so perfectly?"

"I think I can explain that," Uncle Leo says, his expression grave. He turns to the door, raising his voice. "Bring her in."

A moment later, a battered young woman is dragged into the room by one of the house guards, her maid's uniform torn and stained with blood. Ava's eyes widen in shock as she takes in the girl's appearance, her mouth falling open in a silent gasp.

"What happened to you, Geneva?" she asks, her voice trembling with a mixture of concern and confusion. She turns to Uncle Leo, her brow furrowed in a silent demand for an explanation.

"While you and Nick were trying to save Amelia, one of the guards found her sneaking out the back," he says, his tone heavy with disappointment. "They brought her to me, and I was able to solve the missing pieces of the puzzle."

"What did you find out?" I ask, leaning forward in my seat, my heart pounding in my ears.

"Geneva, here is the one who set fire to Amelia's room," Uncle Leo says, his words hitting me like a physical blow.

"Why?" Ava whispers, her face pale with shock and disbelief.

"We all know the protective barrier Ava created around Amelia's room grows in strength the more you attempt to force through it," Uncle Leo explains. "It's a failsafe, designed to activate when someone other than a member of this household or Nickolas tries to breach it."

"But instead, it almost killed Amelia," I continue, the words tasting like ash on my tongue. "Because the fire was set inside the protective barrier, not outside."

"Exactly." Uncle Leo nods, his expression grim. "The barrier couldn't differentiate between an external threat and an internal one. It activated its failsafe, forcing Ava to undo the spell to rescue

Amelia."

"Which made it possible for Ember to portal into the room," I finish, the pieces falling into place with sickening clarity.

"But how did Ember know about the failsafe?" Ava asks, echoing the question that's been burning in my mind. "And how did she know the exact moment I was undoing the spell?"

"That's where Geneva comes in again," Uncle Leo says, his gaze hardening as he looks down at the trembling girl on the floor. "She told Ember about the protective barrier, helped her find a way around it, and informed her the second Ava began the process of undoing the spell."

"Wow," Ava breathes, staring at the witch in stunned disbelief. I can see the betrayal etched into every line of her face, the hurt and anger warring for dominance in her eyes.

But I barely register her reaction, my attention focused solely on the cowering figure before me. This girl, this traitor, is the reason Amelia was taken from me. The reason she's out there somewhere, suffering at the hands of that sadistic bitch. The reason she may yet face whatever fresh hell Ember has concocted for her.

The rage that's been simmering in my veins ignites into an inferno, a white-hot fury that consumes me from the inside out. My vision tunnels, the edges tinting red as I clench my fists so hard I can feel the bones grinding together. She has to pay. She has to pay with her blood for what she's done.

"Nickolas!" Uncle Leo's shout snaps me out of my murderous reverie, and I whip my head around to face him, my chest heaving with the force of my ragged breaths. He gestures to the armrest of my chair, and I follow his gaze, blinking in surprise at the sight of the splintered wood beneath my fingers. I've gripped it so tightly that the delicate carvings have crumbled to dust under the force of my anger.

Releasing my hold on the ruined chair, I rise to my feet, my movements slow and deliberate as I stalk toward the center of the room. I crouch down before the witch, my face mere inches from hers, and I can smell the fear rolling off her in waves.

"If you tell me where she's being held," I murmur, my voice a low, menacing growl, "I will give you an easy death." I pull back just far enough to meet her gaze, my eyes boring into hers with an intensity that has her shrinking away from me in terror.

"I-I-I don't know," she stammers, her whole body quaking like a

leaf in a storm.

I straighten up, towering over her trembling form, my expression cold and implacable. "Burn yourself alive," I command, my tone devoid of any emotion.

Her eyes widen in abject horror, tears spilling down her cheeks as she scrambles forward on her knees, clutching at the hem of my pants in desperation. "Please, I beg of you," she sobs, her voice cracking with the force of her fear. "Kill me instead."

I glare down at her, my lip curling in disgust, and she recoils as if I've struck her, releasing her hold on me and scuttling backward across the floor.

"Please, kill me," she begs, turning to Ava with pleading eyes. But my aunt turns away, her face a mask of stone, and I can see the devastation in the set of her shoulders, the betrayal cutting her to the quick.

"And make sure to start with your toes," I add, my voice as cold and unyielding as the ice in my veins. Without another word, I turn on my heel and stride from the room, the sound of Geneva's agonized screams chasing me down the hall.

As I reach the front door, the scent of burning flesh reaches my nostrils, acrid and cloying, and a grim smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. She chose wisely in the end. Allowing me to kill her myself would have been a far worse fate than the one she's suffering now.

I step out into the night, the cool air a balm against my overheated skin, and I take a moment to breathe deeply, trying to center myself. I need to focus, to channel my rage into something productive. I have to find Amelia, and I have to bring her home before it's too late.

My heart clenches at the thought of her out there, alone and afraid, at the mercy of those monsters. I can't let history repeat itself or let her suffer the way she did the last time Ember took her. I have to be better, faster, smarter. I have to find her, no matter the cost.

With a renewed sense of purpose, I set off toward the castle, my mind already racing with plans and strategies. I'll assemble my best men and send out search parties to scour every inch of the kingdom and beyond. I won't rest until she's back in my arms, safe and whole.

I have to find her. I have to. Because the alternative is too

horrific to contemplate, a world without her light, her warmth. A world I know I cannot survive.

So I will move heaven and earth, will tear apart the very fabric of reality itself, to bring her home. And heavens help anyone who stands in my way.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

The following day, I wake before the sun, driven by an urgency that won't allow me to linger in bed a moment longer. In my hotel room, I quickly ready myself to continue the search for Amelia. The previous night, a witch had managed to narrow her location to the surrounding area. We had searched relentlessly until the first rays of dawn forced the lower-ranking vampires to retreat, and even Uncle Leo pleaded with me to rest. But a mere three hours later, I'm back on my feet, fueled by a resolve that leaves no room for sleep—not while I know she's out there, somewhere, in potential danger. Every fiber of my being rebels against complacency until she's safely recovered.

I shower and dress quickly, my movements sharp and efficient as I gather my phone and wallet. As I reach for the door, the knob turns beneath my hand, and instinct takes over. In a blur of motion, I have the intruder pinned against the wall, my arm pressing into their throat as my claws dig into their chest, ready to rip out their heart at a moment's notice.

"I missed you too," Eric says, his voice strained but amused, a smile tugging at his lips despite the fact that I'm a hairsbreadth away from ending his life.

"Eric?" I release him, stepping back in shock. "What are you doing here?"

"I heard," he says simply, adjusting his rumpled shirt. The wounds on his chest have already healed, leaving no trace of my attack.

I sigh, running a hand through my hair, the weight of the situation crashing down on me anew. "I fear this time it's worse.

Lord Easterlin might be the one behind her abduction." Eric's brow furrows.

"Why do you suspect that?"

I explain about Amelia's gifts, about how the witches who aided Ember would only do so at her father's behest. As I talk, I can feel the dread settling like a lead weight in my gut, the implications of Easterlin's involvement too horrific to contemplate.

"I think you're right," Eric says, his expression grim. "He must have sent Ember to kidnap her to throw you off." I nod, my jaw clenching.

"That's what I'm thinking, too."

"But don't worry," Eric says, his hand coming to rest on my shoulder, a reassuring squeeze. "We'll find her."

"We have to, Eric. I can't—" My voice cracks, the words lodging in my throat as a wave of despair threatens to pull me under. The thought of a world without Amelia, of never seeing her smile or hearing her laugh again, is a yawning void that threatens to swallow me whole.

"We will," Eric promises, his grip tightening. "We won't rest until she's safe."

AMELIA

I come to with a groan, every muscle in my body screaming in protest as I try to move. It takes a moment for the fog to clear from my mind for the reality of my situation to come crashing down with sickening clarity.

I'm hanging from the ceiling, my arms stretched above my head, the shackles biting into the tender skin of my wrists. My toes barely brush the ground as I sway gently, the motion sending fresh waves of agony through my battered body.

Panic claws at my throat as I take in my surroundings, the dank, dimly lit room offering no clues as to where I am now or how I got to this position. I try unmasking my scent again, but the same results. The bonds are laced with oak tree venom.

The sound of footsteps echoing off the stone walls has me masking my scent back, my heart pounding a frantic tattoo against my ribs. A moment later, Ember herself appears, her smile sharp and cruel as she takes in my helpless state.

"For a moment, I feared Dad might have killed you," she says, her tone almost conversational as she approaches me. The mention of

her father reminds my body of the bite mark on my neck that's slowly healing. I won't put it past them to have injected silver into my system by now.

"Ember," I rasp, my voice little more than a croak. "What do you want with me?" She laughs, the sound harsh and grating.

"To think I almost killed you when you're the key to everything my father has sought for years." Ember loves to talk. I'm going to use it to my advantage. I am not going to let history repeat itself today.

"Bringing back Nickolas's brother won't solve your father's problems," I say, trying to keep my voice steady even as I twist my hands in their bonds, desperate for any give, any weakness I can exploit. I found out from Ava that's what Nickolas fears Lord Easterlin will use my gifts for.

Ember's smile only widens a glint of malice in her eyes. "You're even stupider than I thought," she sneers. "Do you really believe he needs your blood to revive that worthless whelp?" I can feel my eyebrows climbing toward my hairline, a silent demand for an explanation. Ember just shakes her head, her expression one of mock pity. "I can see the king truly has no idea," she says, her voice dripping with false sympathy. "That's perfect. It's going to make things so much sweeter when he finds out." She takes a step back, her gaze never leaving mine. "Begin."

Before I can even begin to process her words, a hooded figure emerges from the shadows—an earth witch, if the earthy smell coming off her is any indication. With a casual flick of her wrist, the ground beneath my dangling feet splits open, the stone parting like a grotesque maw to reveal a hidden chamber below.

I feel the air leave my lungs in a shocked gasp as I take in the scene—a cage, massive and reinforced, filled with writhing bodies packed in so tightly they seem to bleed into one another. Vampires, their eyes wild and feral. But not just vampires...new bloods, dozens of them, their fangs bared and glistening with a feral hunger that turns my blood to ice in my veins.

Why? What sick game is Ember and her father playing? I don't have time to wonder what twisted game Ember and her father are playing. Because in the next instant, I'm screaming, my voice raw and ragged as agony rips through me, my skin splitting open by a handless metal blade.

Blood pours from the wounds, painting my arms, my legs, my

face in crimson. I can feel it dripping down my body in warm rivulets, each drop sending the new bloods below into a frenzy of bloodlust.

"Fuck!" I scream, my voice cracking with the force of my pain. The silver in my system is probably preventing me from healing. Ember laughs, her eyes alight with sadistic glee as she watches me writhe and thrash in my bonds. "But we've only just begun," she taunts, her voice sickly sweet.

"Heavens above!" I whimper, my head lolling back against my shoulders. "You're killing me." Ember just shakes her head, her smile never wavering. "Oh, my dear Amelia," she purrs, "that's rather the point."

I can feel my strength ebbing with each passing second, my vision starting to blur at the edges as the blood loss takes its toll. This is worse than Lord Easterlin feeding on me. This is a nightmare.

It feels like an eternity before she finally relents, the wounds sealing shut as abruptly as they appeared, probably the work of a water witch. I sag in my bonds, my breath coming in shallow, panting gasps as I struggle to remain conscious.

The ground closes up once more, the new bloods disappearing from view, but I can still hear their frenzied snarls, the sound sending icy tendrils of fear down my spine.

"Undo the bonds," Ember orders, and I can feel the shackles around my wrists shattering, the sudden loss of support sending me crashing to the ground in a boneless heap. The earth and water witches leave us right after, disappearing into the shadows without a word.

I try to push myself up, to crawl away, but my body refuses to cooperate. Every inch of me throbs with pain, my muscles screaming in protest as I collapse back to the floor, curling in on myself like a wounded animal.

"To think you're supposed to be a hybrid," Ember sneers, looking down her nose at my battered form with undisguised disdain. She punctuates the insult by spitting directly in my face, the glob of saliva warm against my cheek. "Pathetic."

I grit my teeth, glaring defiantly up at her as I wipe my face clean.

"Come closer," I rasp, my voice little more than a gravelly whisper. "I want to tell you something." Ember barks out a mocking

laugh.

"And what could you possibly have to say to me, you worthless little bitch?" Before I can reply, her boot is slamming into my stomach, the steel-toed kick landing with surgical precision on the area the witch sliced open. White-hot agony lances through me, stealing what little breath I had left in my lungs. I double over with a choked cry, spots dancing across my vision as I fight not to black out.

"Why don't you come closer and find out?" I force out through gritted teeth, spitting a mouthful of blood at her feet in defiance.

Ember hesitates, suspicion warring with curiosity in her gaze. But in the end, her arrogance wins out, and she crouches down beside me, her face mere inches from mine. In that moment, I strike.

Calling on every last reserve of energy, I unmask my scent, releasing the pheromones that have kept my true nature hidden all this time. Ember's eyes widen in shock and fear as I lunge forward, my fangs sinking deep into the tender flesh of her throat before she can react. She screams, an unholy shriek of rage and pain as she claws futilely at my face and hair. But I don't release my grip, gulping down mouthful after mouthful of that rich, coppery elixir. I can feel my strength returning with every swallow, my battered body knitting itself back together.

I don't release my grip on Ember until I feel an icy blast of magic slam into my back, shards of frozen agony punching through flesh and muscle alike. A strangled cry tears from my throat as the spell's power lances through my veins, turning my blood to liquid ice in its wake.

Staggering upright, I put what little distance I can between myself and Ember, each step sending fresh waves of torment radiating from the jagged wounds. But I can't stop, can't even slow my pace as Ember's enraged shrieks echo through the room, spurring me into a desperate flight.

The water witch stands in the open doorway, her hands already weaving another deadly incantation. Without breaking stride, I lash out, my claws extended as I rake them across her exposed throat. Crimson sprays in an arcing fountain as her spell shatters, the magic dissipating in a crackle of ozone as she crumples to the ground, clutching at the ragged ruin of her neck. "Come back here, you bitch!" Ember howls from somewhere behind me, her voice a mixture of fury and disbelief.

I don't look back, don't hesitate as I barrel down the dimly lit corridor, my bare feet slapping against the cold stone with each pounding stride. Up ahead, two hulking guards appear, their faces twisted into matching snarls as they move to intercept me. Putting on an extra burst of speed, I duck beneath the first guard's wild haymaker, my claws punching through his sternum and past the fragile cage of bone to clamp around his thrashing heart. With a vicious heave, I rip the organ free, letting his lifeless body crumple to the floor in a rapidly spreading pool of gore.

His partner doesn't even have time to react before I'm on him, a blur of motion and flashing talons. My claws find his throat, slicing through muscle and tendon with surgical precision until the only thing holding his head on is a thin ribbon of flesh. A final, savage twist separates it completely, and he joins his comrade in death, their blood mingling on the stones.

Not sparing them a second glance, I turn and run, following the winding passage toward what I can only hope is an exit to the outside world. Ember's furious cries echo all around me, seeming to come from every shadow, every darkened alcove. But I don't slow down; I can't afford to with my life hanging by a thread.

My lungs are burning, each ragged gasp feeling like I'm breathing in shards of broken glass. The wounds in my back have gone numb, the icy tendrils of the witch's magic still coursing through my veins and sapping my strength with every faltering step. But I push on, driven by a primal need to escape this nightmare, to put as much distance between myself and my tormentors as possible.

Up ahead, I can see a sliver of pale light filtering in from somewhere, the first hint that I may be nearing the surface. Redoubling my efforts, I pour on what little speed I can muster, the shadows seeming to reach out and grasp at me with spectral claws as I finally burst through a heavy wooden door and into the blessed light of day.

I don't stop running, not even when the rough-hewn tunnel gives way to a dense forest, the ground sloping sharply beneath my feet. I simply let gravity take over, half stumbling, half falling down the incline as branches whip at my face and exposed skin.

I have no idea where I'm going, no plan beyond the desperate need to put as much distance between myself and my captors as possible. But even as I run, my heart rabbiting against my ribs, I can feel a flicker of hope kindling in my chest.

I escaped, and I'll be damned if I let Ember and her father get me back. So I grit my teeth against the pain, against the fear, and I keep running, my eyes fixed on the darkness ahead, praying that somehow, someway, I'll find my way back to Nickolas.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

NICKOLAS

We leave the hotel, my steps heavy with a sense of urgency that has become my constant companion these past few days. The pre-dawn air is cool against my skin as we fan out, beginning our search of the areas the witch tracked her to before the trail went dead.

I pause, closing my eyes and drawing in a deep breath through my nose, hoping against hope to catch even the faintest trace of Amelia's sweet, intoxicating scent on the breeze. The scent that never fails to soothe the turmoil in my soul, a balm against the ever-present worries that plague me.

Unconsciously, my mind conjures her image so vividly that I can almost reach out and touch her. I see her standing before me in that pale yellow sundress that hugs her lithe form in all the right places, the soft fabric doing little to conceal the lush curves that have become my torment and my salvation. Her beautiful face is tilted up toward the sun, and those baby blue eyes I adore crinkle at the corners as she smiles wide and unguarded.

A ragged sigh escapes my lips as the vision fades, leaving me bereft and aching down to my very core. Amelia...my heart clenches painfully at the thought of only having her committed to memory, of never again seeing that smile in the flesh, those eyes sparkling with life and something else as they gaze into mine.

"You know, I really thought it would be impossible."

Eric's voice cuts through my melancholy, startling me from my reverie. I blink, refocusing on the present to find him watching me with an odd look on his face—part amusement, part something deeper that I can't quite put my finger on.

"What would be impossible?" I ask gruffly, resisting the urge to snap at him for the intrusion. A slow smile spreads across his lips.

"The day you would think about Amelia without scowling like she ruined your favorite pair of boots." His words hit me like a physical blow, the truth in them undeniable. I swallow hard against the lump forming in my throat, my carefully cultivated mask slipping as myriad emotions war within me. "You know it's not actually a bad thing, right?" Eric continues, his voice uncharacteristically gentle. "Amelia is a wonderful person, and nothing like Jane was."

The name sends a spike of white-hot rage lancing through me, quickly smothered beneath a wave of bone-deep weariness. "I know that," I murmur, my shoulders slumping beneath an invisible weight. "But she's..."

"The enemy's daughter." Eric finishes for me with a nod of understanding. "A fact that can never be changed, no matter how much we might wish otherwise." I nod jerkily. "Then why are you even bothering to try and save her?" he presses. "Lord Easterlin has her now. He's probably already used her to resurrect your brother. Even if we do find her, it may already be too late."

The thought hits me like a sledgehammer to the gut, stealing my breath and leaving me reeling. Because as much as I want to deny it, to push away the very notion, Eric's words ring with an undeniable truth. We may already be too late to stop Easterlin's plans.

So why am I still searching? Why aren't I already preparing if he has truly resurrected my brother? The answer comes to me then, unbidden but carrying the weight of revelation. "Because a part of me is missing without her," I rasp, the words tearing themselves from my throat as if of their own volition. I lift my gaze to Eric's, holding it steadily as I repeat, "I need that part, Eric. I need it like I need air to breathe." Understanding dawns in his eyes.

"I can see the same thing I saw back in your hotel room," he murmurs, almost to himself.

"What's that?" I demand, suddenly desperate to know what he sees so clearly when my own vision is clouded by fear and doubt. But Eric just smiles that infuriatingly enigmatic smile and shakes his head.

"I'll let you figure that out on your own, my friend."

I part my lips, ready to protest and demand an explanation, but

the shrill ringing of my phone interrupts me. Fumbling in my pocket, I wrestle the buzzing device free, my heart pounding as the caller ID blinks Uncle Leo's name on the screen. A surge of nervous anticipation rushes through me as I jab the answer button, pressing the phone tight against my ear.

"Uncle Leo," I whisper, the words catching in my dry throat. Please, let this be good news.

"Nick, you need to return to the castle immediately." His voice is laced with an urgency.

"Why?" I demand, my heart thundering a frantic staccato against my ribcage. My ears strain eagerly, yearning to hear the words my soul has craved since the moment I lost her—the moment her warmth, her light, was torn from my world.

"There is a situation unfolding at the castle that requires your presence. The lords are revolting," Uncle Leo replies, his grave words the last thing I expected to hear. They land like a blow, the wind knocked from my lungs as hope instantly withers within my chest.

"Revolting?" I echo, momentarily thrown by his phrasing.

"Yes, revolting," he confirms grimly. "Against your authority as king."

A tremor runs through me, icy tendrils of disbelief and rage intertwining. "On what grounds?" I grit out, my free hand clenching into a white-knuckled fist.

There's a pregnant pause as if Uncle Leo is struggling to find the right words. When he finally speaks. "They are saying you have become... compromised. That you have fallen for Amelia, and that is the only reason you are so determined to find her."

"What?" The word bursts from me, sharp and disbelieving even as I turn to face Eric, hitting the speaker button so he can hear as well. His expression is a mirror of my own stunned incredulity, eyes wide and concerned.

"You heard me correctly," Uncle Leo continues, each word feeling like a lead weight dropping into the pit of my churning stomach. "They are claiming you have...developed feelings for the enemy's daughter. And they refuse to serve a king who loves the one person that poses the greatest threat to our kind."

A harsh bark of mirthless laughter escapes my lips as I rake a hand through my disheveled hair, the bitter truth of his words settling over me like a suffocating shroud.

"Wow," I mutter, shaking my head in a futile attempt to dispel the rising sense of despair, "just what I fucking needed right now."

As if the universe itself hasn't thrown enough obstacles in my path, now I have to contend with this—a full-blown rebellion from the lords.

"I'm sorry, Nick," Uncle Leo says, his tone softening ever so slightly. "But you need to return and deal with this immediately before it spirals further out of control. Call off the search, at least for the time being—"

"Did you just fucking say that?" I explode, all semblance of composure shattering like a pane of glass as white-hot fury lances through me. "Amelia has been missing for two goddamn days, Uncle! Two fucking days, and you want me to just abandon her?" I can feel Eric's hand on my shoulder, a silent plea for calm, but I shrug it off violently as I continue to vent my rage and frustration. "Because a bunch of old, senile fools have decided to believe the ludicrous notion that I've somehow fallen in love with her?" I demand, my voice rising to a shout as I pace in an agitated circle. "Are you fucking kidding me right now?"

"Nick..." Eric tries again, but I round on him with a snarl, my control slipping through my fingers like water.

"Don't you dare tell me he's right," I growl, jabbing a finger toward the phone still clutched in my white-knuckled grip. "Don't you fucking dare?"

But even as the words leave my mouth, I can see the truth in Eric's eyes, can read the silent apology in the set of his shoulders and the tightness around his mouth. Because as much as it kills me to admit it, as much as every fiber of my being rebels against the mere notion, they are right.

Allowing this dissent to fester, to take root and spread its poison through the ranks of the nobility, will only weaken me. And a weakened king, a ruler whose authority is openly questioned and mocked, will be powerless to affect any sort of meaningful rescue when—not if, when—we finally locate Amelia.

The realization is like a kick to the gut, stealing what little wind remains in my sails as my shoulders slump in defeat. I turn away from Eric, unable to meet his sympathetic gaze as I rake a shaky hand over my face.

"Your uncle is correct," Eric says, his deep voice soft but insistent as he steps up beside me. "As much as it pains me to say it, we can't

afford to let the kingdom descend into chaos right now."

My shoulders slump in defeat, the weight of their words settling over me like a suffocating shroud. As much as it galls me, and every instinct rebels against the mere notion of abandoning the search, I can't deny the truth in what Eric and my uncle are saying. Putting Amelia's rescue on hold, even temporarily, feels like a betrayal of the most visceral kind—a surrender to the very forces that took her from me in the first place. But what choice do I have? Allowing this dissent to fester unchecked would only weaken my position and cripple my ability to affect any sort of meaningful rescue when the time comes.

I'm vaguely aware of Eric watching me, his expression a careful mask of understanding and concern as I wrestle with the bitter reality before us. He knows, as well as I, that this is the pragmatic course, the logical decision a ruler must make when faced with such turmoil on the home front. But logic and pragmatism have never felt so much like ash on my tongue.

Just as I'm about to voice my grudging capitulation, Uncle Leo's voice cuts through the tense silence, his next words like a lifeline tossed to a drowning man. "Don't worry, Nick," he says, that familiar paternal tone doing its best to soothe the ragged edges of my fractured composure. "I'll have some of my most trusted men continue the search for her while you deal with this situation." Relief washes over me in a dizzying wave, allowing me to draw in the first full breath I've managed since this latest crisis reared its head. "Just return to the palace as soon as possible," Uncle Leo presses, his voice taking on a harder edge now. "We need to get this contained before it spirals any further out of control."

"I'll be on my way shortly," I reply, the words emerging in a low rasp as I struggle to keep my composure intact.

"Good. I'll see you soon, then." The call disconnects with a soft click.

Squaring my shoulders, I turn to face Eric fully, allowing the mask of grim determination to settle over my features once more.

"Let's go," I say, moving toward the exit of the forest. I can hear Eric falling into step beside me, that solid, reassuring presence at my side as we make our way back to the hotel to pick up my things.

The walk passes in tense silence, each of us lost in our own thoughts as we navigate the winding path through the pre-dawn gloom. I can feel the first insidious tendrils of doubt beginning to

take root, those treacherous whispers in the back of my mind questioning whether this is all a sign—an omen that the universe itself has aligned against me, that no matter how hard I fight, how far I'm willing to go, Amelia is lost to me forever.

I grit my teeth against the despair that threatens to pull me under, forcing those toxic thoughts away with a vehemence born of sheer desperation. Because the alternative, accepting her loss as inevitable, as a fixed point in the cosmic order, is a desolation too bleak for me to even contemplate. A world without Amelia's light, without the piece of me that she's somehow claimed as her own, is an empty, colorless existence that holds no appeal.

So, I'll play along for now. I'll deal with this latest insurrection from the lords with the same ruthless efficiency I've handled every other threat to my reign over the centuries. And then, with the kingdom's stability assured and my authority re-established, I will turn every last resource at my disposal toward finding Amelia and bringing her home safely.

Anything less than her return is simply unacceptable. And I will tear apart the fabric of reality itself before I let her slip away into the abyss, no matter what price I have to pay.

Amelia will be returned to me, or this world and everyone in it will burn. It's as simple as that.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

I stride through the castle's imposing doors, my footsteps ringing out against the stone floors with a sense of grim purpose. I don't slow my pace, don't pause to admire the grandeur of the vaulted halls and ornate tapestries adorning the walls. My only thought is to deal with this insurrection from the lords as swiftly and decisively as possible so I can return my focus to what truly matters—scouring every inch of the kingdom for Amelia until she is safely back in my arms.

The guards flanking the throne room's entrance snap to attention as I approach, their movements crisp and precise as they pull the heavy wooden doors open in deference to my presence. As I cross the threshold, the low murmur of conversation dies away, an expectant hush falling over the assembled nobility like a shroud.

I don't spare them more than a cursory glance as I make my way to the center of the throne room. Their faces are a blur of simpering obsequious as they rise as one and bow in greeting, a chorus of respectful "Your Majesty" filling the tense silence. With a curt nod, I motion for them to retake their seats, my gaze sweeping over the gathered lords as I wait to see who among them has been chosen to voice their dissent.

The sound of approaching footsteps has me tensing, my eyes narrowing as I track the movement. A figure separates itself from the crowd, striding forward. As he draws closer, stepping into a shaft of pale morning light filtering in through the high windows, I feel a spark of rage ignites low in my belly. Lord Easterlin.

"Your Majesty," he intones with an elegant bow, his expression one of polite deference. But I can see the glint of smug satisfaction

lurking in the depths of his cold, reptilian eyes.

"Lord Easterlin," I reply, unable to keep the surprise from coloring my tone as I take in his presence. "I must admit, I didn't expect to see you here today."

A sly smile curves his thin lips as he straightens, holding my gaze with an intensity that has my hackles rising.

"And why is that, Your Majesty?" he asks, his voice a study in innocence that only serves to further stoke the flames of my simmering temper.

I can feel the anger welling up inside me like a tidal wave, my jaw clenching hard enough to grind my teeth to dust as I struggle to maintain my composure. This bastard, this sadistic snake in the grass, he knows exactly why his presence here fills me with such visceral loathing. Because if not for the ancient laws binding my hands, laws put in place by my forefathers to prevent tyrants from abusing their power, he would be rotting in the deepest, darkest cell of my dungeons right now.

Instead, he stands before me untouchable, his smug arrogance a slap in the face as he no doubt revels in the knowledge that I cannot move against him. Not until I have irrefutable proof that he's disobeyed my direct orders and harmed Amelia. Only then will I be able to strip him of his titles and holdings to unleash the full force of my fury upon him.

But until that moment, he is protected by the very laws meant to safeguard my people from a despot's wrath. And the fact that he's using them as a shield, hiding behind their sanctity while plotting gods know what atrocities, fills me with a rage so potent it's a physical force, burning through my veins like wildfire.

"You seem angry, Your Majesty," Easterlin observes, his tone one of feigned concern as he regards me with those soulless, unblinking eyes. "Is something wrong?"

The mocking lilt to his words is like a match to dry kindling, igniting the powder keg of my temper. I can feel the beast inside me stirring, a bestial snarl building in the back of my throat as my hands curl into white-knuckled fists at my sides. It would be so easy, so deliciously satisfying, to reach out and tear that smug expression from his face, to feel his fragile bones crumbling beneath my grip as I—

"You'll get him one day." Eric's low murmur in my ear cuts through the crimson haze of fury clouding my vision. "But that day

isn't today, my friend."

I grit my teeth hard enough to crack enamel, my nails biting bloody crescents into my palms as I wrestle my darker impulses back under control. Eric is right, damn him. As much as I might wish otherwise, as much as every instinct screams at me to make Easterlin pay for the unspeakable crimes I know he's committed, I cannot act. Not yet. "Nothing is wrong, thank you for asking, Lord Easterlin," I manage to grind out through a jaw so tightly clenched the words emerge as little more than a gravelly rasp.

Turning on my heel, I stalk toward the raised dais at the far end of the hall, each footfall feeling heavier than the last beneath the weight of my barely restrained fury. I can feel Easterlin's eyes boring into my back and can practically taste the smug satisfaction rolling off him in waves as he basks in this small victory.

But I refuse to give him the satisfaction of a reaction, of seeing how deeply his barbs have cut. Squaring my shoulders, I take my place on the ornately carved throne, my uncle and Eric arraying themselves at my right and left hands, respectively. For a brief moment, my gaze is drawn to the empty seat beside Eric, a smaller throne clearly meant for a queen to occupy.

An image flashes through my mind unbidden—Amelia seated there, her beautiful face alight with joy and love as she gazes up at me. I blink hard, forcing the fantasy away with a violent shake of my head. Where in the seven hells did that come from? Yes, things between us have changed, but to imagine her as my queen, beaming at me with such open adoration...it's something I've never considered before.

Shoving those dangerous thoughts aside for the moment, I turn my attention back to the matter at hand. Callum has taken up a position in the center of the room, the other lords arrayed in their seats on either side of the aisle, their expressions ranging from open hostility to grudging neutrality. With a subtle clearing of his throat, Callum commands the room's focus.

"There are some...rumors circulating of late, Your Majesty," he begins, his tone one of careful neutrality that doesn't fool me for an instant. "Rumors that we, your loyal council, fear may be more than just idle gossip."

"You called an emergency meeting because of a rumor?" I ask, unable to keep the mocking edge from my voice as I arch a single brow in his direction. To his credit, Callum doesn't rise to the bait,

though I can see his jaw tighten fractionally at the implied insult.

"Of course not, my King," he replies smoothly, spreading his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "We simply fear this particular rumor, if proven true, could have...far-reaching consequences for the stability of the kingdom. Consequences we would be remiss in our duty not to address."

A muscle ticks in my cheek as I bite back the scathing retort hovering on the tip of my tongue. He's baiting me, trying to goad me into an emotional outburst that he can then use to further undermine my authority in the eyes of the other lords. Well, two can play at that game.

"Is that so?" I ask, letting my voice take on a bored, almost indifferent tone as I lean back in my throne and regard him with an air of faint amusement. "By all means then, Lord Easterlin, enlighten us. What is this rumor you find so troubling?"

For a moment, I think he's going to demur to try and draw out the suspense a bit longer. But then that sly, serpentine smile curves his lips once more as he meets my gaze head-on, his following words dropping like a lead weight into the tense silence.

"The rumor is...that you have fallen in love with the werewolf princess." A startled bark of laughter bursts from my lips before I can stop it, the unexpected absurdity of his accusation catching me completely off guard. I can feel the weight of dozens of eyes upon me as I throw my head back, giving full vent to my mirth as gales of harsh, mocking laughter roll through the throne room. "It's funny, I know, Your Majesty," Easterlin says with a slight chuckle of his own, though his eyes remain as cold and devoid of humor as a snake's. "Preposterous, even. But—" I cut off my laughter abruptly, fixing him with a look that could flay the flesh from bone as I wait for him to continue digging his own grave.

"But what, Lord Easterlin?" I ask, my voice deceptively mild despite the steel underpinning each word. He doesn't flinch from my stare, doesn't so much as blink as he delivers the killing blow with a casualness that turns my stomach.

"But we have reason to believe it may be true." A tense silence falls over the throne room, the weight of Easterlin's words seeming to suck all the air from the vast room. I can feel the eyes of the other lords boring into me, their judgment and condemnation a physical force pressing down on my shoulders.

But I don't let it show, don't give them an inch. Settling back

against the carved iron throne, I regard Easterlin with an expression of faint curiosity, as if he's just presented me with a mildly interesting puzzle to solve rather than leveled an accusation that could see me deposed. "Is that so?" I murmur, letting the words hang in the charged air between us as I take my time formulating a response. When I continue, my tone is one of polite interest, utterly devoid of the roiling tempest of emotions churning just beneath the surface. "And what, pray tell, could have possibly led you to such an...interesting conclusion?" Easterlin's smile widens a fraction, his eyes glittering with a sickening sort of glee as he senses the trap closing around me.

"Why, your actions regarding the princess, of course," he replies, spreading his hands in a magnanimous gesture. "She failed to provide the information you sought, the key to locating and eliminating the last remnants of the werewolf Royal bloodline. Yet instead of punishing her for her disobedience, you kept her close, afforded her a level of protection and privilege unbefitting a prisoner." He pauses, letting his words sink in as he sweeps his gaze over the assembled lords, ensuring he has their undivided attention before continuing. "And now, she has once again gone missing under...mysterious circumstances," he says, putting a subtle emphasis on that last phrase that has my hackles rising. "Yet instead of washing your hands of her, of accepting that she was nothing more than a means to an end that has outlived its usefulness, you have mobilized the entirety of your forces to scour every inch of the kingdom in search of her." Leaning forward, he pins me with a look of feigned concern, his following words soft but carrying the weight of damnation. "We all know the princess herself is useless to you now, Your Majesty. So tell me, what other reason could you possibly have for such...excessive efforts, if not the misguided affections of a lovesick fool?"

The throne room has gone deathly still, every eye trained on me as I consider how best to respond to Easterlin's thinly-veiled accusations. I can feel the weight of the moment pressing down on me, taste the anticipation in the air like a living thing as the lords wait with bated breath to see how their king will react.

"Hmm, so this is what you all believe?" I muse, my gaze sweeping over the gathered nobility, taking in their expressions of barely concealed hostility and judgment.

"Yes, Your Majesty," they reply in unison, their voices ringing

with a condemnation that sets my teeth on edge.

I can feel a smile tugging at my lips, a mirthless thing that doesn't reach my eyes. They must truly think me weak to believe I would let such blatant slander against my rule go unanswered. That I would not have their heads for daring to question my motives, my authority.

Rising slowly from my throne, I descend the dais steps with a deliberate, measured tread, the lords scrambling to their feet in response. I make my way toward Easterlin, holding his gaze with an intensity that has him shifting uncomfortably, his earlier bravado faltering in the face of my silent fury.

He tries to maintain eye contact as I come to a stop before him, looming over his smaller frame with a presence that fills the room, but I can see the first cracks in his facade. The way his throat bobs as he swallows hard, the faint sheen of sweat beading on his brow. Good. Let him squirm.

I stare down at him, my face an impassive mask even as the urge to simply reach out and tear his head from his shoulders washes over me in a red wave of violence. It would be so easy, so satisfying, to end his miserable existence here and now. But I cannot. Not yet.

Lifting my head, I let my gaze rake over the assembled lords once more, letting the weight of my displeasure settle over them like a suffocating shroud before I speak. "The rumors are true," I say, my voice ringing out in the tense silence. I can hear the collective intake of breath, the shock rippling through the room at my apparent confession. "But they are also false."

"What do you mean, my King?" Easterlin asks, daring to lift his head and meet my gaze once more, a flicker of confusion in his cold, reptilian eyes.

"What I mean," I say, pitching my voice to carry to every corner of the cavernous hall, "is that while it is true I have...allowed myself to become unduly invested in the princess, it is not for the reasons you suggest." I pause, letting my gaze rake over the assembled lords as I feed them the half-truth they so desperately want to believe. "I will admit, I have made...certain allowances where the princess is concerned. Allowances that, on the surface, may appear unwise or even treasonous to some." I shoot Easterlin a pointed look. "But I can assure you all, my reasons are purely strategic in nature."

Turning back to face the room, I spread my hands in a placating

gesture as I continue to weave my web of deception. "You see, I recognized early on the potential value in allowing the princess to become...emotionally compromised during her captivity here. By fostering a misguided sense of attachment, of tenderness even, I hoped to make her more pliable, more willing to bend to my will when the time came to extract her knowledge of her family's whereabouts." I shake my head, allowing a rueful smile to curve my lips as I project an air of mild self-deprecation. "In hindsight, perhaps I took the game too far, allowed my own role as her tormentor and jailer to become too...intimate for propriety's sake. If I gave the impression of affection, or heavens forbid, love, for the enemy's daughter, I assure you it was merely an act. A means to an end, nothing more."

Pausing, I turn back to face Easterlin, holding his gaze as I let the full weight of my following words sink in. "The princess may very well be my fated mate," I say, allowing just a hint of distaste to color my tone. "But she will forever be my enemy first and foremost. A means to an end, nothing more." I can see the flicker of uncertainty in Easterlin's eyes, taste the first cloying tendrils of doubt beginning to take root in his mind. Good. Let him wonder; let him second-guess every move as the specter of his own downfall looms ever closer. "As for her recent...disappearance," I continue, turning away from Easterlin to address the room at large once more. "You are correct that I have dedicated considerable resources to her recovery. But I assure you, it is not born of any misguided romantic notions."

Letting my gaze grow hard, I fix each of the lords with a stare that could cut glass until I'm satisfied I have their full, undivided attention. "The princess is a valuable asset, one I have invested far too much time and effort into to simply let slip through my fingers. Her life, her future, belongs to me and me alone to dictate. No one, not even the insufferable bitch herself, will deprive me of my hard-won spoils." My lip curls in a sneer, projecting an aura of cruel disdain that has the lords shifting uncomfortably in their seats. "So you see, my lords, while your...concerns are understandable, they are ultimately unfounded. I can promise you, without a shadow of a doubt, that I do not nor will I ever love the princess. She is a means to an end, a path to achieve my ultimate goal of ensuring our race's supremacy over the werewolf filth, once and for all. Nothing more."

Silence hangs heavy in the wake of my declaration, the lords

exchanging weighted looks and furtive glances as they digest my words. Finally, Easterlin gives a shallow nod of acceptance, though I can see the cogs turning behind his eyes as he formulates his next move.

"I see," he murmurs, unable to keep the faint note of disappointment from creeping into his tone. "Thank you for that...illuminating explanation, Your Majesty. I believe I speak for all of us when I say our...concerns have been laid to rest." The other lords murmur their agreement, some more enthusiastically than others, but the tide has turned. For now, at least, the threat of outright rebellion has been averted.

"In that case," I say, already turning on my heel to depart before the moment can stretch into an awkward silence, "I will take my leave of you. I have a princess to locate and...discipline accordingly for her transgressions."

I don't wait for their dismissal; I simply sweep from the throne room with my head held high, Eric falling into the step beside me. I pause as I reach the threshold, looking back over my shoulder at the lords. "The head of a member of your household is enough," I say, my voice deceptively soft but carrying an unmistakable undercurrent of seriousness. A reminder of what happens to those who dare to question me, to challenge my rule.

Then I'm gone, the doors slamming shut behind me with a resounding finality as I walk out into the pale morning light. It's only once we're outside, the castle's imposing walls at our backs, that I finally allow the mask to slip, releasing the breath I've been holding in a harsh exhalation.

"That was a neat bit of verbal footwork back there." Eric observes, shooting me a sidelong glance. "For a moment there, I almost believed you myself."

I don't respond immediately, too busy wrestling with the storm of emotions roiling just beneath the surface. Anger, frustration, bone-deep weariness...and something else, something I can't quite put my finger on. Something that feels uncomfortably like the first faint tendrils of doubt beginning to take root.

Shaking my head, I force those insidious thoughts away, burying them deep beneath the weight of my determination. There will be time enough to unravel the tangled skein of my feelings for Amelia later. For now, I have to focus on finding her, on bringing her home safely before it's too late.

If that means lying through my teeth, feeding the lords the fiction they so desperately want to believe to keep the kingdom from fracturing, then so be it. I am a king, first and foremost. And kings must do what they must to preserve the stability of their reign, no matter how it might make their souls wither and die a little more with each passing day.

"Let's go," I say at last, squaring my shoulders as I set off once more down the path that will lead me back to Amelia. "We've wasted enough time pandering to those fools' delusions as it is."

Eric falls into step beside me without another word, that solid, reassuring presence at my side as we leave the castle and its petty intrigues behind. Amelia is still out there, lost and alone, and I will not rest until she is back where she belongs, by my side.

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CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

I run, my lungs burning and my muscles screaming with every pounding step. The forest blurs around me, a kaleidoscope of muted greens and browns as I push myself harder, faster, desperate to put as much distance as possible between myself and the horrors I've left behind.

I dare a glance over my shoulder, half expecting to see Ember and her minions bearing down on me, their faces twisted with rage and bloodlust. But there's nothing, only the eerie stillness of the woods and the echo of my own ragged breaths.

Still, I don't slow down. I can't. Not when every fiber of my being screams at me to keep moving, to find somewhere safe to rest and heal. The pain in my legs is a living thing now, a white-hot agony that lances through me with every jarring impact of my bare feet against the uneven ground. Black spots dance at the edges of my vision, and I can feel my strength waning with each passing second.

I'm so tired. So thirsty. The need for blood is a physical ache, a hollow emptiness that gnaws at my insides like a ravenous beast. I can feel myself shutting down, my body's last desperate attempt to conserve what little energy I have left.

I stumble, nearly going to my knees as the world tilts and spins around me. Gritting my teeth, I force myself to keep moving, even as my muscles scream in protest and my head pounds with a sickening intensity.

"I need to find blood," I rasp, my voice little more than a hoarse whisper in the oppressive silence of the forest. With shaking hands, I check my wounds, taking stock of the damage. The gash in my belly has closed, the flesh knitting back together thanks to Ember's

blood. But the wound on my back is another story, the skin shredded and oozing, each movement sending fresh waves of agony radiating down my spine.

I need to feed, and soon. Without fresh blood to fuel the healing process, I'm as good as dead. But as I scan my surroundings with increasingly desperate eyes, I see no sign of animal life, no hint of the sustenance I so desperately need.

Despair rises up to choke me, hot and bitter at the back of my throat. But I swallow it down, refusing to give in to the hopelessness that threatens to consume me. I'm the werewolf princess. I'll survive this.

Gathering what little strength I have left, I begin to collect fallen branches from the forest floor, my movements stiff and mechanical as I snap them into smaller pieces. If I can't hunt, then I'll have to find another way to stave off the bone-deep chill that's slowly seeping into my core.

I've never built a fire before, but I've seen it done countless times on TV. It can't be that hard, right? With fumbling fingers, I arrange the kindling in a small pile, my heart pounding as I cast about for something to use as a spark.

After what feels like an eternity, I find two suitable rocks, their surfaces rough and pitted. Sending up a silent prayer to the heavens, I strike them together over the pile of wood, my breath catching in my throat as I wait for something, anything, to happen.

For a moment, there's nothing. Just the hollow clack of stone on stone and the rasp of my own labored breathing. But then, miraculously, a tiny wisp of smoke begins to curl upwards from the kindling, the first faint crackle of flames licking hungrily at the dry wood.

A sob of relief tears itself from my throat as I watch the fire catch and grow, the warmth of it washing over my chilled skin like a physical caress. Slowly, I lower myself to the ground beside the flickering light, my muscles trembling with exhaustion as I hold my hands out to the flames.

As I sit there, staring into the dancing heart of the fire, my thoughts inevitably turn to Nickolas. Is he out there somewhere, searching for me? Does he feel the same desperate ache in his chest that I do, the same sense of incompleteness that haunts my every waking moment?

A bitter laugh bubbles up from my chest as the realization hits

me like a physical blow. Somewhere along the way, without even realizing it, Nickolas has become my north star. My guiding light in the darkness. When I think of safety, of home, it's not my family's faces that swim before my eyes, but his.

The thought should terrify me. It should fill me with shame and self-loathing. But it doesn't, and I really don't know how to process that right now. And I didn't even have the time to dwell on it because I was so lost in my own thoughts, so consumed by the swirl of emotions churning in my gut that I almost missed the sound of footsteps in the underbrush. But then it comes again, closer this time, and every muscle in my body goes taut with sudden, heart-stopping fear.

"I think I smell her here," a voice calls out, achingly familiar and filled with cruel anticipation. Ember. She's found me.

Panic slams into me like a freight train, and I'm moving before I can even fully process what's happening. How did she already know my scent in vampire form? I don't dwell on it. I simply mask my scent and begin to run.

I can hear them behind me, the pounding of feet and the snarls of frustration as they give chase. But I don't look back, don't dare to take my eyes off the path ahead for even a second. I simply pour every ounce of my remaining strength into my burning muscles and pray that it will be enough.

The world narrows down to the rasp of my breath in my lungs and the drumbeat of my heart in my ears. I run until I can't remember what it feels like to be still, until the very concept of stopping becomes an abstract thing, as foreign to me as the idea of surrendering. My vision blurs and blurs, the world spinning, but I don’t stop.

I steal a glance behind me, checking if they are catching up to me when I collide with something solid and unyielding. The impact sends me tumbling to the ground in a tangle of limbs, my sights swimming as I struggle to orient myself.

"Amelia," a voice breathes, achingly familiar and filled with a desperate sort of hope. I blink up at the figure looming over me, hardly daring to believe my eyes. It can't be. It's impossible. I must be hallucinating, my mind conjuring up the one thing I want most in the world as a final cruel joke. But then he's there, crouching down beside me and gathering me into his arms like I'm something precious, something cherished. The scent of him, all Earthy and

something uniquely Nickolas, wraps around me like a warm blanket, and I can't help but bury my face in the crook of his neck and just breathe. "I found you," he murmurs, his lips brushing against my temple in a feather-light caress. "I can’t believe you just fell into my arms like this."

Tears burn at the back of my throat as I cling to him, my fingers tangling in the fabric of his shirt like I'm afraid he'll disappear if I let go. “Nickolas,” I whisper, his name muffled against his skin, inhaling his scent that calms my soul. He tightens his grip on me, a shudder running through his large frame as he presses his forehead against mine.

"I’ve got you," he rasps, his voice raw with emotion. "And I’m never letting go again."

His eyes shine the brightest I have ever seen, a mesmerizing glow emanating from his green orbs. They shimmer with an emotion I have never witnessed before, leaving me breathless in their brilliance. I can't decipher what he's feeling, but the intensity of it ignites a fire within me, causing my heart to race at the sight.

I try to hold his gaze, but my body weakens by the second, succumbing to the overwhelming pull of darkness.

"Sleep, you're in safe hands," Nickolas's voice reaches me, soft and reassuring, as he tightens his arms around me. I heed his gentle command, allowing my eyes to close as the weight of exhaustion overtakes me.

I fall asleep to the comforting scent of my mate and the warmth of his body enveloping mine, knowing that I am protected in his embrace.

•••

I come awake slowly, the world filtering back in pieces. The musty scent of damp earth and stone. The distant drip of water echoing off cavernous walls. The chill of the air against my skin, a stark contrast to the memory of Nickolas's warmth.

Nickolas.

I sit bolt upright, my heart pounding as my eyes fly open and dart around the unfamiliar space. I'm in a cave; that much is clear. A vampire shelter, if their lingering scent is any indication. But how did I get here? And where is Nickolas?

Ignoring the protest of my healing body, I stagger to my feet and

make my way toward the entrance of the cave. The tattered remains of my dress hang off me in shreds, the fabric stiff with dried blood and caked with dirt. My feet are bare and scraped raw but clean as if someone has taken the time to tend to them while I slept.

I stumble out into the night, the cool air hitting my face like a slap as I scan the surrounding area. There are other vampires milling about, their faces drawn and haggard in the pale moonlight. But no sign of Nickolas.

I approach the nearest soldier and ask if he's seen my mate. But he just shakes his head, his expression unreadable. I glance around the makeshift camp, scanning the faces of the soldiers, searching for any sign of Nickolas. But he's nowhere to be found. Eric, who I expect would also be around, is conspicuously absent.

I decide to attempt finding him by following his scent trail. It's a bit harder than usual since I'm still healing, but I try. Picking up traces of it lingering in the surrounding woods, I head in that direction. But it's like chasing a ghost. Whenever I think I've caught a hint of him, a whisper of that achingly familiar scent, it slips away like smoke through my fingers.

I walk until my legs are burning, pushing forward until I can't pick up his scent anymore. Standing in the middle of nowhere, a sense of dread grips me as I consider the possibility that something may have happened to him while I slept, and his soldiers are unaware. Terror lances through my chest at the thought of something happening to him, of losing him when I've only just reunited with him.

And then, just when I'm about to let panic consume me, I catch it. A faint trace of his scent on the wind, so subtle that it almost slips past me unnoticed. I follow it like a woman possessed, my heart pounding and my breath coming in ragged gasps as I push myself harder, faster, desperate to find him.

The trail leads me to a waterfall, the sound of the cascading water almost deafening in the stillness of the night. But as I draw closer, my heart stutters and then plummets as the scent abruptly vanishes, dissipating like mist beneath the sun.

"No," I whisper, my voice cracking on the word as I spin in a frantic circle, searching for any sign of him. "No, no, no."

But there's nothing. Just the endless expanse of trees and the mocking rush of the waterfall, its beauty suddenly cold and hollow in the face of my despair.

"Nickolas!" I cry out, my voice raw with unleashed tears. "Nickolas, where are you?"

But there is no answer. Just the echo of the relentless pounding of the water against the rocks. Tears well up in my eyes, spilling forth in rivulets down my cheeks. My chest heaves with uncontrollable sobs as the reality of the situation crashes over me like a tidal wave. He's gone. Nickolas is gone, and I have no idea where to even begin looking for him. It’s been at least an hour since I woke up, but I haven’t seen him. It could only mean something terrible has happened to him.

The thought is like a knife to the heart, a pain so acute it steals the breath from my lungs and sends me to my knees on the rocky shore. I can feel myself shattering, the fragile hope that has sustained me through all the horrors of the past day crumbling to dust in the face of this new agony.

But even as I drown in my own misery, even as the darkness threatens to swallow me whole, some small, stubborn part of me refuses to give up. Refuses to accept that this is it. So, I decide to do something rather than crying here. If something has truly happened to Nickolas, I need to get back to the vampire territory as soon as possible and let his uncle know. He would be the best person to help in finding Nickolas.

With a trembling hand, I wipe away the tears streaking my cheeks. Drawing in a final, shuddering breath, I turn my back on the waterfall and begin to make my way back toward the camp. I'm so focused on putting one foot in front of the other, on keeping the despair at bay through sheer force of will, that at first, I don't register the sound of footsteps behind me.

But then I hear it again, closer this time, and every nerve in my body goes taut with sudden, heart-stopping anticipation.

"Amelia," a voice breathes, so achingly familiar that it brings fresh tears to my eyes.

I freeze, hardly daring to breathe as I listen to the sound of him moving through the underbrush, each footfall bringing him closer and closer. Part of me is terrified to turn around, to look and see if this is real or just another cruel trick of my own desperate imagination.

“Is it really you?” I ask, tears of joy filling my eyes, my voice trembling with disbelief and relief.

"Yes, little one, it’s me," Nickolas replies, his voice low and

tender as he slowly spins me around to face him. His fingers, warm and gentle, brush away the tears that spill down my cheeks, the touch sending shivers racing across my skin. He threads his hand into my hair, the silken strands sliding between his fingers like water.

"Nick..." I breathe, but before I can utter another word, his lips are on mine, soft and insistent. The air rushes from my lungs in a gasp, my eyes flying wide with shock at the sudden, intimate contact. But as his mouth moves over mine, coaxing and persuasive, my lids flutter closed, and I melt into him, my hands coming up to twine around his neck, pulling him closer.

Nickolas's arm snakes around my waist, hauling me against him until there's not an inch of space between us. I can feel every hard plane and angle of his body pressed to mine, the heat of him seeping into my bones. His tongue traces the seam of my lips, a silent plea, and I part them with a sigh, granting him entrance.

He tastes like sin and salvation, dark and sweet and addicting. His tongue tangles with mine, stroking and teasing, sending sparks of pleasure shivering down my spine. I moan into his mouth, the sound swallowed by our kiss, and his grip on me tightens, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of my hip.

"I want you, little one," he rasps against my lips, his voice rough with desire. He rocks his hips into me, and I can feel the hard length of him pressing insistently against my belly, the evidence of his arousal sending a thrill of answering heat coursing through my veins.

Panting, I tear my mouth from his, pulling back just far enough to meet his gaze. His eyes, normally a cool, pale green, are now dark and heated, the pupils blown wide with lust. The sight sends a fresh wave of desire crashing over me, my core clenching with need.

I want him, too. So badly it's a physical ache. And in that moment, emboldened by the raw hunger in his gaze, I do something I never thought I'd have the courage for.

Holding his stare, I take a step back, my hands going to the thin straps of my dress. Slowly, teasingly, I slide them down my shoulders, baring my skin inch by tantalizing inch. The fabric whispers over my curves, pooling at my feet, leaving me exposed to his devouring gaze.

Nickolas growls, low and primal, his eyes raking over my naked

form with a heat that feels almost tangible. I can see his chest rising and falling rapidly, his breath coming as fast and hard as my own. The bulge in his pants grows, straining against the confining fabric, and I lick my lips, a thrill of feminine power rushing through me at the visible proof of my effect on him.

"I want you too," I breathe, desire coursing through my veins like molten lava.

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CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

In a flash, Nickolas closes the distance between us, backing me up against a nearby tree. The rough bark digs into my bare skin, a delicious contrast to the heat of his body pressing against mine. His lips find mine again in a searing kiss, stealing the thoughts from my head. All that exists is the taste of him, the feel of his hands roaming over my curves, igniting sparks wherever they touch. As his hands move to my upper body, they come to a stop once they reach my neck, where he wraps his hand around it.

"Are you sure, little one?" he asks, his eyes brimming with lust. I nod eagerly.

Nickolas crushes his lips against mine, and in a swift motion, he lifts me up, wrapping my legs around his waist. He lowers us to the ground, the soft grass a cushion beneath my back. He pulls away just long enough to shed his shirt but leaves his vest on, revealing the glorious expanse of tanned skin and rippling biceps. My mouth goes dry at the sight, wetness pooling in my core.

He crawls over me, his body a delicious weight pinning me down. I clench my thighs together, trying to ease the ache, but it only intensifies as his erection brushes against my stomach.

"Promise me something before we begin," he murmurs, staring into my eyes.

"What?" I manage, my brain fuzzy with lust.

"No matter what I do to you, don't touch me," he commands, his tone brooking no argument.

I want to ask why, want to protest, but the dark promise in his eyes steals the words from my tongue. I can only nod, too horny to pry right now.

Seemingly satisfied, Nickolas presses a tender kiss to my forehead before trailing his lips down the column of my throat, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin. My breath hitches as a shiver runs down my spine, my body responding eagerly to his touch. His lips move down my body, pausing at my breasts, where he lavishes attention on the sensitive peaks until I'm writhing beneath him, wordless pleas falling from my lips. But he doesn't linger, continuing his torturous path downward.

He settles between my thighs, his breath ghosting over my core. I squirm, aching for his touch, for anything to ease the throbbing need.

"Has anyone eaten you before, little one?" he asks, pressing soft kisses to my inner thighs. His stubble rasps against the delicate skin, sending shivers up my spine.

"No," I whimper, my hips canting upward of their own accord, seeking his mouth.

"Good. Because this," he growls, his gaze locked on my glistening folds, "is mine and mine alone."

And then his mouth is on me, his tongue delving deep. I cry out, my back arching off the ground as pleasure crashes over me in waves. He licks and sucks and nibbles, driving me higher and higher. My hands fist in the grass, my body bowing taut as a bowstring.

"Nickolas," I keen, my voice breaking on a sob. "Please..." I can feel his smile against my flesh as he redoubles his efforts, thrusting his tongue inside me again and again. "Nickolas," I moan, feeling his tongue wreak havoc on my core, sending waves of pleasure coursing through me like never before. As I writhe beneath him, I feel his hand trailing up my chest. He grabs my breast, massaging it with skillful fingers before pulling my nipples between his thumb and forefinger, sending sparks of ecstasy shooting through me.

Pleasure coils tighter and tighter in my core, winding me like a spring, ready to snap. Just as I'm about to crest that peak, he pulls away, leaving me aching and empty.

"Not yet, little one," he murmurs, his voice rough with desire. He rises from between my thighs, his lips stained with my juices. He licks them clean before inserting two fingers into my core. My eyes flutter closed as pleasure courses through me, my head spinning with ecstasy. Nickolas thrusts into me repeatedly, driving me closer and closer to the edge until I finally reach the peak, my orgasm

hitting me like a tidal wave. I shatter, crying out his name like a prayer as ecstasy crashes over me, through me, seeming to go on forever. "That's my girl," he praises, smiling as he licks his fingers clean. Rising to his feet, he pulls down his boxers, revealing his impressive size. My eyes widen at the sight, and he smirks, his confidence evident as he moves closer.

He moves back to me, hovering above, his gaze intense and focused. Slowly, almost reverently, he positions himself at my entrance, his breath mingling with mine as we brace for what's to come. He pushes forward into my core. I suck a breath in, grimacing as it hurts being my first time. Nickolas stills instantly, his expression that of surprise. "Amelia," he says, his tone suddenly serious.

“Yes,” I groan out, trying to take in the pain of his member inside my core.

“Are you a fucking virgin?” he asks, staring at me intensely. Unable to find my voice, I simply nod. I'm not surprised by Nickolas's questions. As I mentioned before, many supernaturals don’t wait for their mates anymore. His eyes widen in shock. "Are you fucking kidding me?" he says firmly, starting to pull away, but I halt him, grabbing his arm firmly.

"I want you," I declare, looking him squarely in the eyes.

“I am not fucking letting you have your first time in the woods.” A smile graces my face. I can’t believe that’s why he wants to stop. I reach for him, breaking his “no touching” rule, and cup his face in my hands.

"This moment here couldn’t be more magical than I imagined it," I whisper, my gaze locked with his. He starts to protest, words forming on his lips, but I silence him with a kiss, rolling us over so that now I straddle his hips.

Nicholas locks his gaze with mine, his intense stare conveying a mix of desire and restraint, but he doesn't intervene as I guide him into me, feeling every inch of him filling my core.

“Fuck!” He groans as he closes his eyes, his chest rising and falling with each ragged breath, his heartbeat echoing against my palm pressed against his chest.

I begin to move my hips tentatively, adjusting to the new sensations coursing through my body, a blend of pleasure and discomfort intertwining. I remind myself to be patient, knowing that the initial discomfort will yield to pleasure in seconds.

Nicholas's eyes flicker open, concern clouding their depths as he hears my soft whimper, his brow furrowing in response. With a swift movement, he flips us over, his lips grazing mine as he whispers promises against my skin.

"You're mine to please," he murmurs, his movements slow and deliberate as he eases in and out of me, each thrust calculated to heighten pleasure and assuage any lingering pain. With each gentle movement, the whimper that escapes my lips gradually transforms into unabashed moans of pleasure, echoing through the woods around us.

"Nicholas," I moan, clutching his arm desperately, my nails sinking into his skin as waves of pleasure crash over me. His thrusts become more fervent, driving me closer and closer to the edge with each movement. In a moment of ecstasy, I yield to my primal urges and drag my nails down his back, breaking his unspoken rule once more.

As my climax approaches, pleasure floods my body, overwhelming my senses. I shatter into euphoria, my release crashing over me like a turbulent storm. Nicholas follows suit moments later, filling me with his cum.

Exhausted and panting, Nicholas collapses against me, his body a welcome weight pressing me into the soft earth. We lay there, limbs entangled, hearts beating in sync.

In the hazy contentment, my eyes drift lazily over his form, drinking in every detail. That's when I notice something peeking out from under the edge of his vest—thin, silvery lines marring the smooth expanse of his skin. Scars, old and faded, but unmistakable.

Curiosity flares within me, a sudden, intense need to know the stories behind those marks. What pain has he endured? What battles has he fought? Each scar is a clue to his past.

Slowly, hesitantly, I reach out to trace one of the scars with the tip of my finger. The texture is smooth, and the skin is slightly raised. I feel Nicholas tense beneath my touch, his breath hitching almost imperceptibly.

"Amelia!" he groans, recoiling from my touch as if my fingers were searing brands against his skin. Hastily, he pulls his shirt over his head.

"I know you said I shouldn't touch you. I'm sorry," I murmur softly, regret heavy in my words as I rise to my feet. The remnants of our passion still linger between my thighs, a blush creeping up

my cheeks at the memory.

"And if it makes you feel any better, I wasn't disgusted by them," I offer tentatively, piecing together the puzzle of his scars and the way he shields them as if they're a mark of shame. The realization hits me like a revelation—he thinks I find them repulsive. But nothing could be further from the truth.

"I didn't ask if you were," he retorts sharply, his defenses firmly in place as he hastily pulls on his pants.

"I know, but..." I trail off as I notice he's dressed and about to leave. "Where are you going?" I ask, my voice tinged with confusion.

"Away from you before you begin asking me questions you shouldn't but feel you can because we fucked," he says, walking away, retreating into the forest's shadows without a backward glance.

I stand there, naked as the day I was born, the cool night air brushing against my skin like an icy caress. Shock reverberates through me, sending shivers down my spine as I wonder if Nickolas truly just said that and walked away.

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CHAPTER FIFTY

I watch as Nickolas walks away into the surrounding woods, his broad back and powerful stride a stark contrast to the aching hollowness settling in my chest. I can scarcely believe what just transpired between us, what he said after we just had sex. I know we're not typical mates. That one night of passion doesn't automatically transform us into some fairytale couple. But that doesn't make his words any less like a bullet tearing through my heart.

Tears sting at the backs of my eyes, but I blink them away furiously, refusing to let them fall. I won't cry over him over this. I wanted this, wanted him in a way that terrifies me. And I knew going into it that one passionate night could never be enough to change the fundamental truth of what we are to each other.

Sniffling, I bend to retrieve my tattered dress from the forest floor, grimacing at the state of the once-lovely garment. As I make to pull it over my head, strong hands grip my wrists, halting my movements. I whirl, my breath catching in my throat as I find myself face-to-face with Nickolas once more. "What are you doing?" I demand, my voice emerging as little more than a shocked rasp as I take an involuntary step backward. Rather than answer, he simply plucks the dress from my grasp and holds it out of reach when I make a grab for it.

"Take a bath in the lake first," he rumbles, his tone brooking no argument. Indignation flares hot in my chest as I glare up at him defiantly.

"Why?" I challenge, furrowing my brow. Nickolas's gaze drops then, roaming over my body in a way that has heat blooming in my cheeks. When his eyes finally settle on the junction of my thighs, I follow his line of sight and feel the blood drain from my face.

There, stark against my pale skin, is the unmistakable evidence of our passionate night—a smear of crimson made all the more damning by the lingering scent of Nickolas that clings to me like a second skin. Tears well in my eyes anew as understanding, bitter, and shameful washes over me in a cold wave.

He doesn't want anyone else to know what we've done. Doesn't want the others to catch even a hint of the scent that marks me as his.

"Amelia..." He reaches for me then, his expression unreadable. But I can't let him touch me; I can't bear the thought of feeling his hands on my skin when the sting of his rejection is still so fresh and raw.

"Don't," I choke out, holding up a hand to ward him off as I take another step back. I squeeze my eyes shut against the torrent of emotion threatening to drown me, forcing myself to take a deep, shuddering breath to regain some semblance of control.

When I finally open my eyes again, I find Nickolas watching me with that same inscrutable mask, though I fancy I can see a flicker of some nameless emotion in the depths of his emerald gaze.

"I know what you're thinking," he says at last, his deep voice little more than a rumble. "And that's not why I want you to bathe."

A harsh, mirthless laugh bubbles up from my chest before I can stop it. "Oh really?" I challenge, arching a brow as I cross my arms over my chest. "Then please, enlighten me." I can see the flicker of surprise, quickly masked, that crosses his features at my biting tone. Good. Let him be taken aback by the venom in my words. Let him feel even a fraction of the hurt and humiliation I'm feeling at this moment.

"Amelia, you're wrong." He tries again, taking a step toward me. "I don't want you to bathe for the reasons you think."

"Then why?" I bark, the anger and frustration that's been simmering beneath the surface finally boiling over as I glare up at him defiantly. "What other possible reason could you have for being so eager to erase every last shred of evidence that we—"

"Yes, I don't want anyone else to know we fucked." Nickolas cuts me off, his words like a physical slap that leaves me reeling. He runs an agitated hand through his tousled hair, shaking his head as if struggling to find the right words. "But it's not because I'm ashamed or because I regret what happened between us. It's because I—"

"Save it," I spit, turning on my heel and stalking toward the lake's edge. I can't bear to hear another word, can't open myself up to any more of his excuses or half-truths. Not when my heart is still bleeding out all over the forest floor.

I don't look back as I wade into the icy shallows, shivering as the water laps at my calves, thighs, and hips. I can feel Nickolas's eyes burning into my back, sense the weight of the words he still wants to say hanging heavy in the air between us.

But I don't turn around, don't give him the chance to drive that knife any deeper into my battered heart. I simply take a deep breath and let myself sink beneath the surface, the shock of the cold water like a balm against the rawness of my wounded pride.

When I finally emerge, sputtering and gasping for air, Nickolas is gone. I don't know whether to be relieved or devastated by his absence as I set about the grim task of scrubbing away every last trace of him from my skin.

My fingers work mechanically, roughly scouring every inch of my body until the water around me runs pink with diluted blood. I can feel the sting of tears mingling with the lake water on my cheeks, but I refuse to acknowledge them, refuse to give voice to the maelstrom of emotions churning inside me.

I stay in the water until my skin is numb and my teeth are chattering until I'm certain that not a single wisp of Nickolas's scent still clings to me. Only then do I finally drag myself out onto the grassy bank, my limbs heavy and my heart even heavier.

A set of clean clothes—a soft T-shirt and a pair of worn sweatpants—lies folded neatly on the shore, clearly left for me while I bathed. I don't have to bring them to my nose to know they'll carry Nickolas's scent. The thought of wearing anything that bears his scent right now is almost enough to make me double over with a fresh wave of anguish.

But the chill night air is already raising goosebumps on my damp skin, so I force myself to pull on the garments with shaking hands. Sure enough, that achingly Earthy scent wraps around me like a second skin the moment the fabric settles over my frame.

It should be comforting, this reminder of the man I've come to care about dearly in the past months. But tonight, it only serves to reopen the ragged wound in my chest until I can barely breathe past the pain.

Swiping angrily at the tears that refuse to stop falling, I turn and

begin making my way back toward the cave where Nickolas is no doubt waiting. I focus on putting one foot in front of the other, using the rhythmic crunch of leaves and sticks beneath my bare feet to ground me as I follow the rapidly increasing scent of my vampires in the air.

By the time I finally emerge from the tree line, I've managed to regain some semblance of composure. My eyes are still red-rimmed and swollen, my cheeks blotchy from the force of my anguished sobs. But I've pushed the worst of the hurt down, letting it settle into a dull, throbbing ache that I can just barely tolerate as I scan the small encampment.

The first person I see is Nickolas, emerging from the mouth of the cave with his usual brooding intensity. But he's not alone—at his side is a figure I never thought I'd see again, one that has a wide smile splitting my face before I can stop it.

"Eric!" I call out, my steps quickening as I cross the distance between us. Before the burly vampire can so much as open his mouth, I've flung myself into his arms, burying my face in the comforting warmth of his chest as he chuckles.

"Hello, princess," he rumbles, squeezing me tight for a brief moment before releasing me and holding me at arm's length. His eyes roam over me appraisingly, that perpetual hint of amusement crinkling the corners as he takes in my disheveled appearance. "You're looking a bit...rumpled."

I huff out a watery laugh, swiping at my cheeks in a futile attempt to hide the evidence of my distress. "It's been a long few days," I hedge, not quite meeting his eyes.

Eric's brow furrows slightly, but he doesn't press, simply giving my shoulder a comforting squeeze. "Well, I'm just glad to see you're in one piece," he says warmly. "I've missed you, princess."

The sincerity in his tone, the open affection in his gaze, is almost enough to undo me all over again. Blinking rapidly, I force a smile that I hope looks more genuine than it feels. "I've missed you too," I murmur, meaning every word.

Before I can say anything else, another thought occurs to me, one that has my heart leaping with a sudden burst of hope. "How's Lily?" I ask eagerly. "Is she alright? I can't wait to see her and—"

"Amelia."

The sound of Nickolas's deep baritone cuts through my rambling like a knife, sending an involuntary shiver down my spine. I turn

slowly to face him, my fingers tightening almost convulsively around Eric's arm as I brace myself for another emotional onslaught.

Nickolas is watching me with that same unreadable expression, his eyes glittering like shards of emerald in the pale moonlight. For a long moment, he simply holds my gaze, the weight of all the things left unsaid between us hanging in the charged air like a living thing.

Then, finally, Nickolas parts his lips to speak, but I don't give him the chance. I can't bear to hear whatever excuse or rationalization he's prepared this time.

"So, Eric," I interject, grabbing his hand and giving it a firm tug. "I would love to hear all about your trip. Which cities did you and Lily visit?"

I don't wait for a response, simply pulling Eric along as I stride away from where Nickolas stands watching, his expression unreadable. I risk a glance over my shoulder, catching his eyes for the briefest of moments before I turn away again. He sighs, the sound heavy with something I can't quite put my finger on, and drops his shoulders in what looks like resignation as he watches me lead Eric off.

We find a relatively clear patch of ground and settle down, Eric launching into an animated retelling of his and Lily's adventures over the past few weeks. I try to focus on his words, on the warmth of his familiar presence beside me. But part of me can't help but be hyper-aware of Nickolas moving about the camp, can't stop my gaze from drifting to him every few minutes like a moth drawn to a flame.

Eventually, the others begin making preparations to break camp, packing up supplies for our journey back to the castle. Eric and I rise as well, dusting ourselves off as the first hints of urgency begin to permeate the air.

We make our way over to where a few vehicles are parked. A sleek black SUV catches my eye, and I head toward it, assuming it will be our transport. Sure enough, Nickolas falls into step beside me and produces a set of keys from his pocket, thumbing the unlock button. With a muted chirp, the SUV lights flash in greeting as Nickolas opens the driver's side door and slides in behind the wheel.

I hesitate for a brief moment before rounding the car and pulling open the passenger door. The buttery, soft leather interior greets

me, the scent of Nickolas's scent already permeating the air in a way that has my heart stuttering in my chest.

Gritting my teeth, I lower myself gingerly onto the plush seat, wincing as a lingering ache blossoms between my thighs. Nickolas roars the car to life, and we begin our trip back to the castle in steel silence. The tension in the air is almost suffocating, a heavy weight pressing down on us both.

I try my best to ignore my body’s reaction to having him this close, his presence stirring up a storm of conflicting emotions within me. His body heat envelops me, his masculine scent wrapping around me like a comforting blanket, yet each breath feels like a struggle against the turmoil swirling inside.

Sleep slowly starts to call me, its tendrils tempting me with sweet oblivion after the day's trials. But just as my eyelids begin to droop, Nickolas's voice cuts through the quiet.

"It's not what you think," he rumbles, his deep voice sending a shiver down my spine. Startled, I pull my eyes open and meet his piercing emerald gaze. I blink at him owlishly, struggling to make sense of his words through the haze of sleep in my eyes.

"What are you talking about?" I ask, a hint of sharpness creeping into my tone.

"The reason I asked you to bathe," he clarifies, his breath fanning warmly over my cheek. "It wasn't for the reasons you assumed." I can't help but scoff at that, shaking my head in disbelief.

"Then why?" I challenge, turning my head to meet his piercing stare head-on. "We both know there isn't another explanation."

For a long, charged moment, Nickolas simply holds my gaze, his expression unreadable as always. But there's an intensity simmering in those fathomless emerald depths, a banked fire that threatens to consume me if I let it.

Finally, he tears his eyes away with seeming reluctance, fixing his stare on the road ahead as he guides the car out onto the main thoroughfare with a gentle press of the accelerator. "Just know it isn't what you think," he says at last, his tone infuriatingly neutral.

I open my mouth, a biting retort on the tip of my tongue. But remember, with Nickolas, when he sets his mind to something, there is no convincing him otherwise. With a weary sigh, I let the fight go out of me, sagging back against the plush leather as we lapse into silence.

The journey back to the castle passes in a blur, the low thrum of

the engine and the warmth of Nickolas's body gradually lulling me into an uneasy doze. I don't mean to give in to the bone-deep exhaustion pulling at me. But between the lingering ache of my injuries and the sheer emotional upheaval of the past hour, I can't seem to keep my eyes open.

Each passing mile feels like a lifetime, the landscape outside the window blurring into a hazy tableau as my mind drifts in and out of consciousness. Nickolas's presence beside me offers a faint sense of security, a tether anchoring me to the present even as sleep threatens to pull me under.

Despite my best efforts to fight it, sleep eventually claims me, wrapping me in its comforting embrace as the world fades into darkness. The journey continues in a disjointed procession of dreams and half-awake moments, each one merging seamlessly into the next until I'm unsure where reality ends, and imagination begins.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

My eyes flutter open, and I find myself cradled securely in Nickolas's arms as he strides through the castle's imposing entrance hall. I blink owlishly, taking in my surroundings with a mixture of confusion and lingering exhaustion.

"You're awake," Nickolas rumbles, his deep voice vibrating against me in a way that has warmth blooming low in my belly.

"Yeah," I murmur, making a halfhearted attempt to extricate myself from his hold. But Nickolas simply tightens his grip, his arm like an unyielding band across my back.

"I didn't wake you when we arrived," he explains, his tone brooking no argument as he begins ascending the staircase. "I wanted to carry you."

I frown up at him, puzzled by his uncharacteristic tenderness. "Why aren't we going to my room?" I ask as he pushes through his room doors and lays me on the bed. Nickolas parts his lips to respond, but whatever he was going to say is cut off by the sound of the door banging open behind us. We both whirl toward the noise, and I feel my breath catch in my throat at the sight of the newcomer.

"Amelia!" Beatrice cries, her eyes shining with unshed tears as she takes in my appearance. Before I can so much as open my mouth, she’s crossing the room in a flurry of skirts, pushing Nickolas out of the way and enveloping me in her arms.

"Beatrice," I manage to choke out, returning her fierce embrace and breathing in the comforting herbal scent of hers. Over her shoulder, I catch a glimpse of Nickolas moving toward the bar cart as he pours himself a generous tumbler of amber liquid.

"How are you, child?" Beatrice asks, finally releasing me and holding me at arm's length to give me a critical once-over. "Are you alright?"

"I'm good," I assure her with what I hope is a convincing smile. In truth, I feel anything but "good"—my body is still aching from my ordeal, and my heart is a tangled mess of conflicting emotions. But the last thing I want is to worry her further.

"And your wolf?" she presses, her keen eyes raking over me in a way that makes me feel utterly exposed. "Is she recovering?" I nod, swallowing hard. "Almost fully healed."

Beatrice's lips purse in a tight line, but she gives a curt nod of acknowledgment before her gaze shifts, her eyes narrowing shrewdly. "Something's changed," she declares, her tone making it clear this is not a question.

"Really?" I ask, feigning innocence even as my heart kicks up a staccato rhythm against my ribs. Surely she can't know...can she? "What do you mean?"

"Did something happen between the two of you?" Beatrice blurts out, her words causing Nickolas to choke on his drink, spraying the expensive whiskey across the polished floor in a fine mist.

"No!" he sputters vehemently, swiping at the droplets clinging to his lips with the back of his hand. But I can see the way his shoulders have gone taut, the muscle ticking in his clenched jaw as he struggles to regain his composure.

My gaze darts back to Beatrice, who is watching the entire exchange with narrowed eyes. "Why do you ask?" I hedge, trying to keep my voice light and casual.

Beatrice's lips purse in a thin line as she scrutinizes me. "I just have this feeling that something...significant happened between the both of you," she says, her tone laced with a hint of reproach as her gaze flicks briefly to Nickolas.

I can see him stiffen out of the corner of my eye, his throat working convulsively as he avoids Beatrice's pointed stare. A bead of sweat trickles down his temple, and I feel a sudden, irrational surge of anger toward him. If he's going to be this obvious about what happened between us, why did he even bother sleeping with me in the first place?

"Nothing happened," I lie, turning my attention back to Beatrice and holding her gaze steadily. "We're both just...tired from the journey, that's all."

Nickolas makes a small noise of agreement, finally tearing his eyes away from the whiskey stain on the floor to meet my gaze. There's a muscle twitching in his jaw, and I can see the sheen of perspiration beading across his brow. But he doesn't contradict me, simply giving a tight nod of confirmation.

Beatrice's eyes narrow further, flicking between the two of us with an inscrutable expression. For a long moment, the tension is thick enough to cut with a knife, the weight of unspoken truths hanging heavy in the air. Then, finally, Beatrice seems to deflate with a weary sigh, reaching out to give my hand a gentle squeeze. "Alright, if you say so," she concedes, though her tone makes it clear she isn't fully convinced. "You must be famished after everything. I'll prepare something for you right away." She leans in to press a soft kiss to my forehead, her lips lingering for the barest moment before she pulls away. "I'm just glad to have you home safe, my dear," she murmurs, her eyes shining with a complicated blend of emotions.

"Me too, Beatrice," I whisper, my throat tight with a sudden swell of affection for her than I thought possible.

With one final, inscrutable look at Nickolas, Beatrice turns and sweeps from the room, leaving an expectant hush in her wake. I can feel Nickolas's eyes burning into the back of my head as he moves away from the bar, his footsteps slow and measured as he approaches the bed where I'm seated. "Please leave," I say, turning around and lying down, my voice slightly more than a hoarse rasp as I tug the plush duvet around my shoulders. "I'd like to rest before Beatrice returns with food."

For a long moment, there's no sound but the crackle of the fire in the grate and the thud of my own heartbeat in my ears. Then, finally, I hear Nickolas exhale—a soft, shuddering breath that raises the fine hairs on the back of my neck. "I still want you," he murmurs, so low I almost don't catch the words over the rush of blood pounding in my ears.

And then he's gone, the door clicking shut behind him with a sort of finality that makes my chest ache in a way I can't quite put my finger on. Slowly, I turn to stare at the heavy wooden door, my brow furrowed in confusion and a thousand other emotions I can't even begin to untangle. What did he mean by that? Does he regret what happened between us, or does some deeper part of him still crave the intimacy we shared? And why does the thought of him

wanting me again fill me with equal parts longing and dread?

With a weary sigh, I flop back against the pillows and squeeze my eyes shut, trying in vain to quiet the endless loop of questions swirling through my mind. I don't have the energy to make sense of Nickolas's mixed signals right now. All I want is to give in to the bone-deep exhaustion pulling at me and let the world fade away, if only for a little while.

Maybe when I wake, I'll have found some semblance of clarity amidst the chaos. Or maybe I'll simply have to accept that when it comes to Nickolas, I may never truly understand the depths of his feelings—or my own.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

NICKOLAS

I make my way through the castle's winding corridors, my steps heavy and my thoughts even heavier. I can still smell Amelia's scent clinging to me like a second skin and feel the warmth of her body cradled against mine. It's maddening, this bone-deep craving for her that seems to grow stronger with every passing moment.

Eventually, my wandering feet carry me to my study, the heavy oak door swinging open to reveal the comforting familiarity of my sanctuary. Sinking down into the high-backed leather chair behind my desk, I rest my elbows on the polished surface and cradle my head in my hands, struggling to make sense of the storm raging inside me.

I don't like the way Amelia looked at me back there, the hurt and anger simmering beneath the surface of her carefully neutral expression. I want nothing more than to take that pain away, to open myself up to her in a way I've never allowed myself to be vulnerable before. But every time I try, every time I get close to letting those walls down, the fear rises up to choke me—the terror that she'll see me for the worthless bastard I truly am and turn her back on me forever.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I don't immediately register the sound of the door opening. It's only when a familiar voice breaks through the haze of my brooding that I finally look up, my eyes finding Eric's concerned gaze from across the room.

"I guessed I'd find you here," he says by way of greeting, already making his way toward the chair opposite my desk.

"Why?" I ask gruffly, pulling open the bottom drawer of my desk

and retrieving a bottle of whiskey and two tumblers. If ever there was a time for a stiff drink, this would be it.

"Isn't it a bit early to be drinking?" Eric remarks as I pour two generous measures of the amber liquid, though he accepts the glass I slide across the desk to him. It’s the early hours of the morning. We traveled all night and arrived just before noon. I arch a brow at him, taking a slow sip and letting the burn chase away some of the tension coiled in my shoulders. Eric watches me for a beat, then chuckles ruefully and raises his own glass in a mock salute. "Fair point," he concedes before taking a healthy swallow. "Maybe it's not too early after all."

"I asked you a question," I say, my voice sounding rough and gravelly even to my own ears.

"Oh yes, you did," he responds, sitting up. "I figured you'd be holed up in here since Amelia is clearly pissed at you about something."

I snort into my glass, rolling my eyes heavenward. "You know, I could just as easily be here working," I point out, though we both know it's a feeble attempt at deflection.

"Not after that long ride home, you're not," Eric counters with a knowing look. "You're not that much of a masochist, my friend." I open my mouth to argue but then simply sigh and shake my head in resignation. He's got me there; the last thing I want to do right now is bury myself in the minutiae of ruling after the events of the past few days.

"Fair enough," I concede, taking another fortifying pull from my glass.

An expectant silence falls between us, thick and weighted in a way that has me shifting uncomfortably in my seat. I know what Eric is waiting for, can see the curiosity burning in those perceptive eyes of his. But the thought of giving voice to the tumultuous events of the past hours, of laying myself bare like that...

It's more terrifying than any battle I've ever faced.

"What did you do to piss her off this time?" Eric finally asks, his tone a strange blend of resignation and reproach. I wince at the bluntness of his words, feeling them like a physical blow even as I acknowledge the truth in them. Reaching for the whiskey bottle, I refill my glass and take a fortifying swallow before finally meeting his pointed stare head-on.

"It's a long story." I hedge, already knowing it's a futile deflection.

Sure enough, Eric simply leans back and folds his arms across his broad chest, making it clear he's not going anywhere until I spill. "I've got time," he says mildly.

With a weary sigh, I launch into an explanation of everything that's transpired since she stumbled into the area I was taking a shower in the forest. I don’t spare any details as I recount the way I couldn't seem to stop myself from touching her, from surrounding myself with her intoxicating scent and the warmth of her body against mine. The way that, despite my best intentions, despite every ounce of self-control I thought I possessed...I ended up taking her and making her mine in the most primal, visceral way imaginable.

"You didn't," Eric breathes when I finally grind to a halt, his eyes wide with a mixture of shock and something that looks suspiciously like admiration.

I simply nod, unable to meet his gaze, as I reach for the whiskey bottle once more and refill my glass with a trembling hand. "I did," I rasp, the words like ash on my tongue. "I claimed her as my mate in every sense of the word."

A heavy silence falls between us, the weight of my confession seeming to suck all the air from the room. I can feel Eric's eyes boring into me, can practically taste the questions and recriminations hovering on the tip of his tongue. But I can't bring myself to look at him, can't bear to see the disappointment and disgust I know will be reflected in his eyes. "Well?" he prompts, at last, his voice carefully neutral. "Are you going to tell me the rest? Or am I supposed to guess what happened after your little...lapse in control?"

I flinch at his choice of words, the sting of them hitting me like a physical blow. Because that's exactly what it was, isn't it? A moment of selfish weakness where I allowed my baser instincts to take over, consequences be damned.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I force myself to recount the rest—the way Amelia had looked at me in the aftermath, the hurt and confusion writ large on her beautiful features. The cruel, thoughtless words I'd flung at her in my panic. By the time I'm finished, my voice is little more than a hoarse rasp, my throat feeling raw and abused. I can't bring myself to look at Eric, can't bear to see the recrimination and pity I know will be reflected in his eyes.

"Amelia is an angel," he says at last, his tone laced with a mixture of exasperation and grudging fondness. "If it were me, I would have cut your fucking balls off for saying something like that after taking my virginity."

The words are like a punch to the gut, stealing what little air remains in my lungs as I finally lift my head to meet his steady gaze. "You think I don't know that?" I rasp, my voice little more than a broken croak.

"How could you be so fucking stupid, Nickolas?" Eric continues, shaking his head slowly as he regards me with a look of mingled pity and disappointment.

"I panicked," I choke out, hating how pathetic the excuse sounds even to my own ears. "Even without...what happened between us, she has every right to ask about the scars on my back. The second she brought it up, I just...I couldn't handle the thought of her knowing the truth. Of her looking at me with revulsion and disgust when she learns what happened."

Eric's expression softens slightly at my admission, though the disappointment still lingers in the tightness around his eyes. "You don't know that's how she'll react," he points out, his voice taking on that infuriatingly reasonable tone he always adopts when he thinks I'm being particularly thick-headed.

"I don't regret mating with her, Eric," I continue, needing him to understand even if he can't forgive me. "Having her, being joined with her in that way...it was everything I never knew I needed." I pause, struggling to find the words to explain the bone-deep ache that's been my constant companion for centuries now. The endless, gnawing emptiness that I've learned to live with. "But telling her the truth?" I shake my head, feeling the first prickle of moisture at the corners of my eyes as the words tear themselves from my throat in a ragged whisper. "Letting her see the ugliness? That's a risk I can't take, Eric. Losing her light, her warmth...it would destroy me in a way I don't think I'd ever recover from."

The silence that falls between us then is heavy, weighted down by the weight of my fears and insecurities laid bare. Eric regards me steadily for a long moment, seeming to weigh his next words carefully.

"You really don't think she could handle the truth?" he asks at last, his voice gentle yet insistent. I open my mouth to respond, to reiterate my conviction that no, Amelia could never accept the

ugliness of my past. But Eric holds up a hand, effectively cutting off my protest before I can give voice to it. "Lily took my story well, you know," he continues, a wistful sort of smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "She didn't turn away from me in disgust or horror. If anything, knowing the truth about what happened, about the things I've survived...it only made her love me more fiercely."

I feel something twist deep in my gut at his words, a flicker of something dangerously close to hope flickering in the darkness of my soul. But I quickly smother it, shoving it back down into the lightless depths where it belongs.

"Lily is...different," I argue, my voice little more than a hoarse rasp. "She understands what we've endured because it happened to her too. Her cousin Amelia..." I trail off, shaking my head slowly. "It will only make her realize more that I am not worthy to be hers."

"You're wrong," Eric states, his tone firm and unyielding in a way that has me lifting my head to meet his steady gaze. "Amelia is not like that. She will never think such." I open my mouth, a thousand protests and justifications rising to my lips. But Eric simply shakes his head, effectively silencing me with the weight of his stare.

"Think about it, Nickolas," he says, his voice taking on that lecturing tone he knows I can't resist. "If the situation were reversed, if Amelia was the one harboring some deep, dark secret from her past...wouldn't you want her to be honest with you? Wouldn't you rather know the truth, no matter how ugly or painful, than live a lie?"

I think about his words and know he is right—I would want the truth from Amelia, no matter how much it might hurt to hear. I would want to know, but that's not enough.

"I can't risk it," I whisper. "I can't take the chance of losing her." Eric regards me steadily for a long moment, seeming to weigh my words against some unknowable inner scale. Then, finally, he nods once, a short, sharp dip of his chin that conveys an understanding of my choice.

"I will let it go for now," Eric says, leaning back in his chair with a sigh.

"Thank you," I reply.

"You're welcome, and before I forget, is it because of the lords that you asked Amelia to bathe after your little tryst in the woods?" I nod, my jaw clenching at the memory of that moment, of the hurt and confusion in Amelia's eyes when I'd asked her to bathe. If only

she knew that, I would have loved nothing more than for everyone to smell our mating on her. "Nickolas!" Eric exclaims, his tone sharp with disbelief.

"What?" I snap, my grip tightening on my glass until my knuckles turn white.

"You already told the lords that you're coaxing Amelia for information," he points out, his gaze boring into mine. "If one of their spies relays back to them that you slept with her, they won't suspect a thing. They'll just think it's part of your plan."

I shake my head. "I know that," I admit, my voice rough with emotion. "But that's not why I don't want them to find out about what happened between us."

Eric's brow furrows even further, confusion etched into every line of his face. "Why, then?" he asks, clearly struggling to understand my reasoning.

I sigh, rubbing a weary hand over my face as I try to find the words to explain the tangled web of fears and doubts plaguing my mind. "Because even if they believe it's all part of some grand scheme to get Amelia to trust me, to reveal her family's secrets...they still won't be too keen on the idea of me mating with her."

"Really?" Eric asks, his tone laced with skepticism. "Why not?"

"Because she's my mate, Eric. It won't be hard for her to get pregnant." Understanding dawns in Eric's eyes, followed quickly by a grim sort of realization.

"And as much as the lords might want revenge for their late king, they wouldn't take the chance of you siring a hybrid heir," he finishes for me, his voice heavy with the weight of that knowledge. I nod, my chest tightening with a fear so potent it steals the breath from my lungs.

"Exactly," I rasp, my grip on my glass turning white-knuckled once more. "They would watch Amelia like hawks, just waiting for the first sign of a pregnancy. And the moment they suspected she was carrying my child..." I can't even bring myself to finish the thought, to give voice to the soul-deep terror of what they might do to her, to our unborn baby. The images that flood my mind are too horrific to contemplate, too devastating to put into words.

"They would hurt her," Eric says softly, his expression grim with understanding. "They would see it as their duty to prevent a hybrid from taking the throne, no matter the cost."

"I can't let that happen," I whisper, my voice cracking on the words. "I can't bring any more harm to her doorstep, not when she's already suffered so much because of me."

Eric is silent for a long moment, his gaze searching mine as if trying to peer into the very depths of my soul. "I know you're trying to protect her," he says at last, his tone gentle but firm. "But Nickolas, you have to realize...the lords' fears aren't entirely unfounded." I frown, my brow furrowing in confusion.

"What do you mean?" I ask warily.

"I mean that as much as you might want to deny it, as much as you might try to convince yourself otherwise...the lords are right," Eric says softly, his gaze holding mine unflinchingly.

I open my mouth to protest, to deny the truth of his words with every fiber of my being. But something in his expression stops me, a knowing glint in his eye that sends a shiver of unease down my spine.

"No, they're not," I try to argue, but even I can hear the lack of conviction in my voice. "I don't...I can't..."

"It's okay, Nickolas," Eric soothes, reaching across the desk to lay a comforting hand on my arm. "These things have a way of sneaking up on us when we least expect them."

I shake my head, a bitter laugh escaping my lips as I try to wrap my mind around the implications of his words.

"Fuck," I breathe, the word escaping me on a shuddering exhale as I drop my head into my hands. "I'm so screwed." Eric chuckles, the sound holding no real mirth.

"Welcome to the club, my friend," he smiles while I remain silent, my mind reeling with the new realization I had no clue how to deal with.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

AMELIA

The sweet, mouthwatering aroma of freshly cooked food gently wakes me from my sleep. My eyes flutter open, blinking against the light in the room as I slowly sit up, stretching my sleep-stiffened muscles with a contented sigh.

A smile tugs at my lips as Beatrice bustles into the room, a laden food tray balanced expertly in her hands. An intoxicating aroma instantly wafts toward me—the unmistakable rich, creamy fragrance of her famous shrimp pasta, making my stomach rumble in anticipation.

"Thank you," I murmur as she sets the tray down on my lap with a flourish.

Beatrice returns my smile, her warm eyes crinkling at the corners as she takes a seat on the edge of my bed.

"How was your sleep, dear?" she asks, her voice laced with gentle care and concern.

"Good," I assure her, picking up my cutlery and twirling some of the steaming pasta around the tines of my fork.

"That's good to hear," Beatrice says, nodding in satisfaction. But then her expression turns serious, a hint of something I can't quite decipher flickering in her eyes as she reaches into the pocket of her apron. My heart stutters in my chest as she pulls out a small, innocuous-looking tablet, holding it out to me with a somber expression. "He asked me to give this to you," she says softly, placing the pill in my open palm with a gentleness that belies the gravity of the moment.

"Oh." The word escapes me in a breathless whisper, my appetite

vanishing in an instant as I stare down at the tiny white tablet. I don't need Beatrice to tell me what it is—I know with a bone-deep certainty that it's the morning-after pill.

A dull ache blooms in my chest. Of course, he would want to erase every trace of our night together, to wash away the evidence of our passion as if it had never happened. As if it meant nothing to him beyond a momentary lapse in judgment.

Swallowing hard against the sudden lump in my throat, I force a tight-lipped smile onto my face as I meet Beatrice's gaze. "Thank you so much, Beatrice," I manage to choke out, my voice sounding strained and brittle even to my own ears. She nods, patting my hand with a comforting touch that only serves to make the ache in my chest intensify.

"You're always welcome, dear," she murmurs before her expression turns thoughtful once more. "Before I forget, Eric wanted me to tell you that Lily is sick and bedridden," she adds, her tone laced with a hint of apology. "That's why she hasn't come to see you yet. Apparently, Eric didn't know until you guys got back."

"Oh, heavens above!" I gasp, my eyes widening in alarm as a fresh wave of worry crashes over me. "What's wrong? Is it something serious?" Beatrice shakes her head, a reassuring smile tugging at her lips.

"No, just a little something," she soothes, her voice calm and steady. "Don't worry yourself, dear. She'll be fine. I'll make sure of it."

I nod, feeling a rush of gratitude toward her. "Thank you," I whisper, my voice thick with emotion.

Beatrice simply nods, leaning down to press a soft kiss to my forehead before turning to leave. I watch her go, my heart heavy with a complicated tangle of emotions that I can't even begin to unravel.

With a sigh, I pop the pill into my mouth and swallow it dry, wincing at the bitter taste it leaves on my tongue. I force myself to finish my breakfast, mechanically chewing and swallowing each bite even as my stomach churns with a sickening mixture of hurt and confusion. Once I'm done, I make my way to the bathroom.

Stepping into the opulent space, I'm surprised to find all of my usual toiletries and products already laid out, as if they've been moved from my own room. Nickolas must have told them to move it while I was sleeping.

"I think Nickolas is confused." Marie's voice suddenly filters into my mind, her tone laced with worry.

"Marie!" I exclaim, a genuine smile breaking across my face. "It's so good to hear your voice again."

"Hello, Amelia," she greets, smiling. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm...good," I reply, though even I can hear the hesitation in my voice. "Better now that you're here." Marie hums in acknowledgment.

"I'm proud of you, you know," she says softly, her words filled with a quiet sort of conviction. I frown, puzzled by the sudden shift in topic.

"For what?" I ask, genuinely curious.

"For finally accepting that part of yourself," Marie explains, her voice warm with approval. "For embracing your true nature, even if only for a moment." A slight smile creeps onto my lips as her words bring back the memory of how it felt to let go of all my fears and doubts and simply lose myself in my true form.

"Thank you, Marie," I whisper, my throat tight with a complicated tangle of emotions. "For always being there, even when I don't deserve it."

"You always deserve it, Amelia," she murmurs softly. "Never doubt that."

And with those parting words, she fades back into the recesses of my mind, leaving me alone with my thoughts once more. Taking a deep breath, I step into the shower, letting the warm water wash over me. Afterward, I change into my own clothes that have been moved into Nickolas's closet. I slide into a comfortable pair of leggings and pull on an oversized sweater.

I make my way toward the door, determined to go see Lily to check how she's doing and get some answers about my family's fate. But before I can even touch the handle, the door swings open, revealing a familiar figure looming in the doorway.

Nickolas.

My breath catches in my throat as I take in the sight of him, all tousled hair and piercing green eyes that seem to see straight through to my very soul. He's clearly freshly showered and changed, the crisp scent of his soap mingling with the unique aroma that is purely him.

For a moment, we simply stare at each other, the air between us thick with a tension that has my heart pounding in my chest. Then

his gaze rakes over me from head to toe, a frown tugging at the corners of his mouth as he takes in my appearance. "Where are you going?" he asks, his voice low and rough with an emotion I can't quite decipher.

"To see Lily," I reply, reaching for the door handle once more. But Nickolas is faster, his hand slamming against the wood and holding it firmly shut.

“You're not going," he growls. I suck in a sharp breath, frustration warring with the instinctive urge to submit to his command.

"I understand this isn't the best time for me to go out," I try to reason, keeping my voice calm and even, "but I was planning on taking some guards with me. I don't plan on getting myself kidnapped again anytime soon." Nickolas's jaw clenches, his eyes flashing with a possessive sort of fury that sends a shiver down my spine.

"Not good enough for me," he bites out, his grip on the door tightening until his knuckles turn white.

I release a slow, measured breath, trying to think of a way to convince him to let me go. I know his concerns are valid that the risk of me being taken again is still far too high. But I also know that I can't just sit here and wait for answers, not when Lily is the only one who can tell me if my family is gone forever or not. "Come with me, then," I suggest, holding his gaze steadily. But Nickolas just shakes his head, his expression hardening into an implacable mask.

"I have business to attend to," he says flatly, leaving no room for argument. Desperation claws at my throat; the need to see Lily, to know the truth, is overwhelming in its intensity.

"Then let me go with guards," I plead, hating the way my voice cracks on the words.

"No!" Nickolas snarls, his eyes flashing with a dangerous light.

"Nickolas, please—"

"No, Amelia!" he cuts me off, his voice like a whip crack in the tense silence. "And that's final." He takes a step closer, crowding into my personal space until I can feel the heat of his body like a physical caress. His eyes bore into mine, dark and fathomless and filled with a fierce, protective sort of emotion I can’t name that steals the breath from my lungs. "If I find out you disobeyed me on this," he murmurs, his breath fanning hot against my cheek, "trust

me, you won't like the consequences."

And with that ominous warning, he turns on his heel and strides out of the room, slamming the door behind him with enough force to rattle the hinges. I stand there for a moment, my heart racing and my mind whirling with a dizzying array of emotions.

Then, with a muttered curse, I lunge for the door, twisting the handle with a desperate sort of urgency. But it doesn't budge, the lock clicking into place with a finality that has my stomach sinking like a stone.

"Fuck!" I scream, slamming my palm against the unyielding wood in a fit of impotent rage. Whirling away from the door, I stalk toward the windows, yanking back the heavy curtains with a sharp tug. The sight of thick, silver bars crisscrossing the glass greets me. "Seriously, Nickolas?" I mutter under my breath, shaking my head in disbelief. He's really gone all out to keep me locked up tight like some sort of precious treasure he's afraid will be stolen away.

Gritting my teeth, I unmask my scent and feel the familiar sensation of fangs elongating in my mouth. I reach out and wrap my hands around the bars, hoping to use my enhanced strength to break through the barrier. But the moment my skin makes contact with the silver, a searing pain lances through my palms, burning like acid as it eats away at my flesh. I yelp, snatching my hands back and cradling them against my chest as I stare at the bars in mute horror.

Oaktree venom!

He's really thought of everything, hasn't he? Every possible avenue of escape. But I'll be damned if I let that stop me. Scanning the room with a critical eye, I wrack my brain for any possible means of escape. And then, like a bolt of lightning, it hits me.

The adjoining door to my own room.

`Without a second thought, I lunge toward it, fingers scrambling over the handle as I yank it open with all my strength. The door crashes against the wall with a resounding bang that has me freezing in place, holding my breath. But no footsteps come rushing in response to the commotion.

Peering through the open doorway, I see only the dimly lit familiarity of my own room stretching out before me. No guards burst through to apprehend me for the abrupt disturbance. I send a silent prayer of thanks to the heavens.

Slipping inside, I make a beeline for the windows, my heart

soaring as I realize they're blessedly free of any silver bars oak tree venom. Without hesitation, I shift into my wolf form, snatching up my clothes in my jaws before leaping through the open window with a graceful bound. I land lightly on the soft grass below, my paws barely making a sound as I dart behind a nearby tree to shift back into my human skin. As I hurriedly pull on my clothes, Marie's voice filters into my mind, laced with concern.

"Do you really think this is a good idea?" she asks, her presence a soothing balm against the frantic energy thrumming through my veins. I pause, considering her words for a moment.

"No," I admit, my voice little more than a whisper. "But don't you want to know how Dad is doing? If he's even still alive?" I can feel Marie's hesitation, her fear for my safety warring with the desperate need for answers.

"I do," she says at last, her tone heavy with resignation. "But I don't want us to get hurt in the process, Amelia. We've been through enough already."

"Don't worry," I assure her, squaring my shoulders as I step out from behind the tree. "I've got it covered."

And with that, I make my way back into the castle, my steps quick and purposeful as I head toward the one place I know I can find her.

The kitchens.

As I walk, I send up a prayer to the heavens, begging them to keep Nickolas occupied and away from my path. Luck seems to be on my side for once as I make it to the kitchens without incident, slipping inside and scanning the bustling space for a familiar face. And there, in the midst of the chaos, is Beatrice, her kind eyes widening in surprise as she catches sight of me.

"Beatrice," I breathe, rushing over to her. "Do you have a minute?" She frowns, her brow furrowing in concern as she takes in my disheveled appearance.

"Is everything alright?" she asks, her voice low and soothing. I shake my head, swallowing hard against the lump of emotion rising in my throat.

"I wish to visit Lily, and I need someone Nickolas trusts to come with me, along with a few guards," I explain, the lie slipping effortlessly from my lips.

"Oh," she replies, believing my words, though I can't help but feel a pang of guilt for deceiving her. Yet the urgency to see Lily, to find

out the fate of my family, outweighs any lingering remorse. I nod in confirmation. Beatrice wipes her hands on her apron. "Let's go."

Relief floods over me like a crashing wave, nearly buckling my knees. I reach out and grasp Beatrice's hand, squeezing it tightly as I lead the way out of the kitchens. With each step, the weight of my deceit settles heavily in my stomach, the knowledge of betraying Nickolas's trust gnawing at me. Yet, I cling to the desperate hope that Lily holds the answers I seek, and in this moment, that's all that matters.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

We arrive at Lily’s, and I retrieve the spare key from under the carpet, allowing Beatrice and me access to her house. As we step inside, the strong scent of herbs overwhelms me, stirring a deep sense of concern for her well-being. "Lily?" I call out, my voice echoing through the stillness. "It's Amelia." A muffled response drifts down from the upper floor, and I turn to Beatrice with a pleading look. "Would you mind waiting here while I go up and see her?" I ask, my tone laced with a desperate sort of urgency. Beatrice nods, her expression soft with understanding.

"Of course, child," she murmurs, giving my hand a gentle squeeze. "Take all the time you need." With a grateful smile, I make my way up the stairs, my heart pounding a frantic rhythm against my ribs. When I reach Lily's door, I pause for a moment, drawing in a shaky breath before raising my hand to knock.

"Come in," Lily's voice calls from within, sounding weaker than I've ever heard.

Steeling myself, I push open the door and step inside, only to freeze in my tracks at the sight that greets me. Lily is propped up against a mountain of pillows, her face pale and drawn, but that's not what steals the breath from my lungs. Instead, it’s the unmistakable sound of a third heartbeat resonating in the room.

“You’re pregnant,” I whisper, tears of joy welling up in my eyes. Lily smiles, her own eyes glistening with unshed tears as she opens her arms wide.

"Surprise," she says softly, her voice thick with emotion. I'm moving before I even realize it, crossing the room in a few quick strides to gather her into a fierce hug.

"I'm so happy for you," I murmur, burying my face in her hair as I breathe in her familiar scent. "So, so happy." Lily clings to me just as tightly, her tears dampening the fabric of my shirt.

"Thank you, Amelia," she whispers, her voice trembling with a complicated tangle of emotions. "And I'm so glad to see you. I was so worried..."

I pull back just far enough to meet her gaze, my own vision blurring with tears. "Don't worry about me," I assure her, reaching up to gently wipe away the moisture on her cheeks. "I'm fine, I promise."

Lily nods, sniffling softly as she composes herself. "I have so much to tell you, Amelia," she says, her expression turning serious. "Something happened while I was away on my trip."

I stiffen, a cold sense of dread settling in the pit of my stomach. "What is it?" I ask my voice little more than a hoarse rasp. "What happened?"

Lily takes a deep breath, her gaze holding mine steadily. "I found them," she says simply, the words hanging heavy in the air between us.

For a moment, I can only stare at her, my mind struggling to process the enormity of what she's just said. "You...you found them?" I repeat, hardly daring to breathe. "Our family?" Lily nods, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"Yes," she confirms, her voice ringing with a quiet sort of triumph. "I did."

I feel like the world is spinning around me, my head swimming with a dizzying array of emotions. "And they're...they're alive?" I manage to choke out, my heart in my throat.

"They are," Lily says softly, her eyes shining with a joy that takes my breath away. "They're alive and thriving, Amelia."

A sob tears itself from my throat, my knees going weak with the sheer force of my relief. I sink down onto the edge of the bed, burying my face in my hands as the tears come in earnest now, great, heaving sobs that shake me to my very core.

"I can't believe it," I gasp out, my voice muffled and thick with emotion. "I can't believe they're really okay."

Lily reaches out and takes my hand in hers, her grip warm and reassuring. "I couldn't believe it either," she admits, her own voice wavering slightly. "But they are, Amelia. They're safe and sound, and they're staying—"

"No!" I cut her off, my head snapping up to meet her startled gaze. "Don't tell me where they are. Please." Lily frowns, confusion etched into every line of her face.

"But don't you want to see them?" she asks, her brow furrowing. "To be reunited with your family after all this time?" I shake my head, swallowing hard against the lump of emotion rising in my throat.

"Of course I do," I whisper, my voice cracking with the words. "More than anything. But right now...knowing their location would only put them in more danger. I can't risk that, Lily. I won't."

Understanding dawns in her eyes, followed quickly by a fierce sort of pride. "Okay," she says softly, giving my hand a gentle squeeze. "I understand. When the time is right, when you're sure you can keep them safe...we'll find a way to bring you back together. I promise."

I nod, blinking back a fresh wave of tears as I try to compose myself. "Thank you," I murmur, my throat tight with gratitude. "For everything."

We lapse into silence then, both of us lost in our own thoughts as we try to absorb the magnitude of what we've just learned. Eventually, I force myself to change the subject, asking Lily about her pregnancy and her plans for the future with Eric.

But even as we talk, laugh, and cry together, I can feel the weight of my deception settling heavily in my gut. Because as much as I want to stay here with Lily, to bask in the glow of her joy and the miracle growing inside her...I know I can't. Not when Beatrice is waiting for me downstairs, not when I've already been gone far longer than I should have. With a heavy heart, I give Lily one last fierce hug before pulling away, promising to visit again as soon as I can.

But as I make my way back down the stairs, my steps heavy with reluctance, I freeze at the sight that greets me at the foot of the stairs. Because there, standing with his arms crossed and his face like a thundercloud, is Nickolas.

He glares at me, his eyes flashing with a fury that sends a shiver of fear down my spine. I open my mouth to say something, to try and explain, but he cuts me off with a sharp gesture. "Save it," he growls, his voice low and dangerous as he stalks toward me.

I take an instinctive step back, my heart pounding in my throat as he closes the distance between us. But before I can even think to

run, to try and escape the wrath I know is coming, he's scooping me up and throwing me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

I yelp in surprise, my hands scrabbling for purchase against the broad expanse of his back as he spins on his heel and strides toward the door. Over his shoulder, I catch a glimpse of Beatrice's stricken face, her eyes wide with shock and dismay. "I'm sorry," I mouth to her, knowing that whatever punishment Nickolas has in store for me, she'll likely bear the brunt of it, too, for her part in my little scheme.

But Nickolas doesn't even spare her a glance as he carries me out of the house, his grip on me unyielding as he makes his way back toward the castle with long, purposeful strides. I don't dare speak, don't dare do anything that might further ignite his temper.

It's only when we reach his room that he finally sets me down, all but throwing me onto the bed with a force that steals the breath from my lungs. I scramble to sit up, my heart in my throat as I watch him pace the length of the room, his hands clenched into white-knuckled fists at his sides.

"I'm sorry," I blurt out, unable to bear the tense silence any longer. "I know it was reckless of me to leave the castle, but I had to see Lily. It was important."

Nickolas rounds on me, his eyes flashing with a fury that sends a shiver down my spine. "So you could ask her about your family," he snarls, his lip curling in a sneer. "Don't bother denying it, Amelia. I know she's your cousin."

I feel the blood drain from my face, my mouth falling open in shock. "How...how did you...?"

"You think I wouldn't fucking notice the resemblance?" he scoffs, shaking his head in disbelief. "The way you two are so close, the little similarities in your features? I'm not an idiot, Amelia. It wasn't hard to put the pieces together."

"P-please," I stammer, my voice barely a whisper as I struggle to form words, my throat suddenly parched. "Don't hurt her. She's pregnant, Nickolas. She's no threat to you."

Something flickers in his eyes at that, a brief flash of surprise quickly replaced by a grim sort of understanding. "Don't worry, Eric would never let me lay a finger on her, and I'm not that much of a monster, no matter what you might think of me, Amelia."

I feel some of the tension drain out of me at his words, a shaky exhale escaping my lips as I close my eyes in relief. But it's short-

lived because, in the next moment, Nickolas is looming over me, his hand fisting in my hair as he tilts my head back to meet his gaze. "But you," he murmurs, his breath fanning hot against my cheek. "Do you have any idea what it would do to me if something fucking happened to you? How utterly destroyed I would be if I lost you again?"

My heart stutters in my chest. There's a raw sort of vulnerability there, a desperate intensity that steals the breath from my lungs.

"I had to see her," I whisper, my voice little more than a ragged rasp. He closes his eyes, a muscle ticking in his clenched jaw as he visibly struggles to rein in his temper.

“Don’t ever fucking do it again. I can’t…” he says, his grip tightening on my hair as he opens his eyes. He doesn't need to finish his sentence; his meaning is clear. My heart races in my chest. Nickolas is going to be the death of me. I'm so confused right now.

"I won't," I promise, holding his gaze. I stare deeply into Nickolas's eyes, searching for the truth of his soul in those fathomless green depths. For a moment, just a heartbeat suspended in time, I see him—all of him, laid bare and vulnerable in a way I know he rarely allows.

But then he's dropping his gaze to my lips, his own parting slightly as he wets them with the tip of his tongue. I can see the intent in his eyes, the hunger that simmers just beneath the surface as he starts to close the distance between us.

Anger flares in my chest, and I turn my face away at the last second, feeling his lips graze my cheek in a feather-light caress. "I'm not having sex with you again," I say, my voice barely above a whisper as I rise from the bed, putting some much-needed distance between us. It's not that I don't want him. God, every cell in my body is screaming at me to give in, to let him consume me in the way only he can. But I know that if I let him kiss me, if I allow myself to get lost in the heat of his touch...there'll be no turning back. And right now, with the wounds of his words still raw and bleeding, I can't afford to let my guard down like that. Not again.

Nickolas makes a low, frustrated sound in the back of his throat, his hands coming up to grip my arms as he tries to tug me closer once more. "Amelia, I told you," he rasps, his voice rough with barely contained emotion. "I don't regret what happened between us. Not for a single moment."

I scoff, the sound harsh and bitter even to my own ears as I

wrench myself out of his grasp. "You sure have a funny way of showing it," I mutter, my gaze skittering away from his as I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly feeling exposed and vulnerable under the intensity of his stare.

"Then tell me how I can prove it to you," he demands, the words coming out like a challenge. "Tell me what I need to do to make you believe me, Amelia."

My head snaps up at that, my eyes widening in shock as I take in the fierce, almost desperate expression on his face. He's serious, I realize, with a start. He actually wants to prove himself to me, to find some way to bridge the chasm of hurt and mistrust that yawns between us.

The realization sends a flicker of something dangerously close to hope, sparking to life in my chest, but I quickly tamp it down. I can't afford to let myself be swayed by pretty words and empty promises. Not again.

But maybe...maybe there is something he can do.

"Tell me how you got the scars on your body," I say quietly, holding his gaze steadily even as my heart pounds a frantic rhythm against my ribs.

Nickolas blinks, clearly taken aback by the sudden change in topic. "How the fuck does that prove anything?" he asks, his brow furrowing in confusion. I shrug, trying to keep my expression neutral even as my palms grow damp with nerves.

"I don't know," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. "But if you can't trust me with that part of yourself, with the truth of your past...then how can I believe anything else you say?"

For a long, tense moment, he simply stares at me, his jaw clenched, and his eyes shadowed with some unnameable emotion. I can practically see the war raging behind that inscrutable gaze, the battle between his desire to keep me close and his fear of letting me in.

"Amelia," he says, at last, my name emerging on a soft, almost reverent exhale. My insides dance at the way he called my name, but I push the feeling aside, refusing to let it sway me.

"No, Nickolas," I cut him off, my voice trembling slightly but filled with a quiet sort of conviction. "If you really want to prove to me that you don't regret what happened between us, then you'll tell me about your scars." I can’t let this opportunity slip away without uncovering the truth about what happened to him.

He closes his eyes, a muscle ticking in his clenched jaw. For a moment, I think he's going to shut me out and walk away like he did last time.

But then he's taking a deep, shuddering breath and reaching for the hem of his shirt, tugging it over his head in one smooth motion. I suck in a sharp gasp at the sight of his bare torso, at the way the muscles of his chest and abdomen ripple and flex with each ragged inhale.

And then he's turning around, baring the ruined expanse of his back to my gaze. I can't help the soft, wounded sound that escapes me at the sight of those scars, the way they crisscross his skin in a grotesque tapestry of pain and suffering.

Slowly, I close the distance between us, my heart pounding in my chest as I reach out with a trembling hand. My fingertips hover over one of the scars for a breathless moment, tracing the jagged line without quite making contact.

Then, ever so gently, I let my palm settle against his skin, feeling the way he shudders beneath my touch. Nickolas sucks in a sharp breath, his muscles tensing as if bracing for a blow. But he doesn't pull away, doesn't try to stop me as I map the raised edges of the scar with a feather-light caress.

Emboldened by his stillness, I lean in and press my lips to the puckered flesh, my eyes fluttering closed as I breathe in the scent of him. It's a barely-there touch, the ghost of a kiss, but I pour every ounce of tenderness and acceptance I possess into that fleeting contact.

I need him to know that these scars, these marks of his suffering, don't diminish him in my eyes. That they could never make him any less beautiful.

When I finally pull back, Nickolas turns to face me, his expression raw and vulnerable in a way I've never seen before. His eyes search mine, dark and fathomless and filled with a desperate sort of intensity that steals the breath from my lungs.

"Amelia," he rasps, his voice rough with emotion. "Can you promise me something?" I swallow hard, my throat suddenly tight with apprehension.

"What is it?" I whisper, almost afraid to hear his answer.

He takes a deep, shuddering breath, his gaze never leaving mine as he reaches out to take my hand in his. His fingers tremble against my skin, betraying the depth of his nerves. "Promise me that no

matter what I tell you, no matter how ugly or painful the truth might be...you won't leave me."

My heart clenches at the plea in his voice, at the way his grip tightens on my hand as if he's afraid I'll slip away at any moment. "Nickolas," I start, my voice cracking on his name. But he cuts me off before I can continue, his expression fierce with a desperate sort of determination.

"Promise me," he repeats, the words emerging like a prayer. "Please, Amelia. I need to hear you say it."

I hesitate for a long moment, my mind whirling with the weight of what he's asking. Can I really make such a vow? But as I stare into those haunted green eyes, seeing the raw, aching vulnerability that lies just beneath the surface...I know I can't deny him this. Not when he's looking at me like that. So I nod, my throat too tight to speak, as I squeeze his hand in silent reassurance. It's a promise I'm not sure I can keep, a vow that may very well come back to haunt me. But in this moment, with Nickolas laid bare before me in every sense of the word, I can't bring myself to refuse.

He closes his eyes for a brief moment, his shoulders sagging as if a great weight has been lifted from them. When he opens them again, there's a new resolve burning in their depths, a grim sort of determination that sends a shiver down my spine.

"I was raped," he says, and I freeze, unable to believe my ears.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

"Amelia," Nickolas calls out, his hand gently waving in front of my face to recapture my attention.

I blink, my mind snapping back to the present. "Sorry, what did you just say?" I ask, my voice trembling slightly as I stare at him.

"I was..." he begins, but I can't bear to let him finish. The raw vulnerability in his eyes is too much.

"Don't repeat it," I interrupt quickly, my heart aching for him. I can only imagine the courage it took for him to reveal to me the first time.

"Amelia," he continues, his voice barely above a whisper, "I know it's a lot to take in, and I would understand if being with someone like me isn't appealing anymore. But please, still be in my life. It wouldn't be complete without you."

His words wash over me, and my heart swells to the point of bursting. Tears well up in my eyes as I take in the man before me—so strong, yet so afraid of losing me. I never imagined that Nickolas, being the enemy, would utter such a heartfelt plea. "Please say something," he urges, his hand squeezing mine, seeking reassurance.

Words fail me in this moment, but actions speak louder than any speech. I close the distance between us, pressing my lips to his in a kiss that's meant to convey all the words I can't find.

Nickolas reacts with a soft gasp of surprise, but he quickly recovers, his arms wrapping around me to pull me closer. I melt into him, deepening the kiss, letting my actions speak. His taste is intoxicating and leaves me dizzy with longing. We kiss until we need to breathe and have to pull apart. When we finally do, my lips are swollen from his kisses.

"I'm not leaving you because something horrible happened to you in the past," I whisper, my breath mingling with his as I press my forehead against his. Nicholas captures my lips once more, the intensity of his kiss igniting a fire within me that threatens to consume us both. His hands trace the contours of my body with a hunger that leaves me breathless, and before I can comprehend what's happening, my dress is gone, leaving me standing before him in nothing but my underwear. He pulls away, and I gaze up at him, my chest heaving with anticipation.

"Kneel," he commands, his voice sending a shiver down my spine as my core clenches. Without hesitation, I obey, sinking to my knees before him, my pulse racing with a heady mix of excitement and trepidation.

Nicholas unbuckles his belt with practiced ease, the sound echoing through the stillness of the room as he pulls his member free from the confines of his pants. The sight of him standing before me hard sends a surge of desire coursing through my veins, the wetness pooling between my thighs a testament to the effect he has on me.

I lean forward, eager to taste him, but Nicholas stops me with a firm grip on my hair, pulling me back with a look of determination in his eyes. Confusion clouds my thoughts as I stare up at him.

"Hands behind your back," Nicholas commands, his tone firm, and I obey. I feel the cold metal of his belt encircle my wrists, binding them together in a makeshift restraint. As he stands before me once more, his hand finds its way into my hair, tilting my head back to meet his gaze. "Suck," he orders, his voice devoid of emotion, but the mere command sends a jolt of desire straight to my core, leaving me trembling with need. Without hesitation, I take him into my mouth, the taste of him overwhelming my senses as I struggle to accommodate his size.

I suck him eagerly, my throat burning with the effort of accommodating his girth, determined to please him despite the discomfort. Nicholas takes control of my movements, guiding my head with a firm hand as he thrusts into my mouth with increasing urgency.

"Good little one," he murmurs, his control unyielding as he moves my head with purpose, aiming to bring himself his release with each forceful thrust. Tears prickle at the corners of my eyes, my throat burning as I suck him hard. "Fuck, Amelia," he groans, his

head thrown back in ecstasy as I continue to suck him with fervor. "You look so fucking beautiful right now, little one," he praises, his eyes locking with mine as he gazes down at me with desire. His compliment washes over me, causing more wetness to pool between my legs.

I continue to suck until the taste of him floods my mouth as he releases his cum into it, his grip on my hair tightening as he reaches the peak of his climax.

"Good girl," he whispers, lifting me off the ground by my hair. He wipes away my tears with gentle hands, his gaze softening as he looks upon me with a mixture of lust and another emotion in his eyes. I can't figure out what yet.

Nickolas's touch sends shivers down my spine as his hands trail from my cheeks, igniting a trail of fire along my skin down my chest. His fingers tease and tantalize, brushing over my hardened nipples, each caress sending pulses of desire coursing through me. With a gentle yet possessive grip, he halts at my core, parting my panties with a deliberate slowness that leaves me breathless. He inserts a finger into it.

"Someone's ready for me to take her." Nickolas's voice, husky with desire, sends a thrill through me.

"Yes, Nickolas, I am," I breathe, feeling the heat of his gaze as he pulls my head back.

A sharp gasp escapes my lips as he delivers a light slap to my breast, the sting mingling with the rush of arousal. "Call me daddy," he commands, and my heart swells. He's only doing this because he knows I'm into it.

"Daddy." the word slips past my lips, my heart swelling more at the smirk that graces his lips. Nickolas moves his hands to my waist, his touch electric against my skin as he slowly pulls my panties down. I step out of them, my breath catching in my throat.

"Walk to the bed and lean over with your ass out," he commands, his deep voice sending shivers down my spine. I do as he says, anticipation building inside me with each step. A second later, I feel Nickolas at my entrance, hard and pulsing with need. He enters me without warning, filling me completely.

"Nick..." I gasp, but before I can finish saying his name, he slaps my ass, the sting only heightening my arousal. "Daddy," I moan wantonly, and he rewards me with a deep thrust that has my toes curling. Nickolas grabs the middle of the belt and begins to pound

into me harder and faster, hitting that sweet spot inside me over and over. Waves of pleasure radiate through every fiber of my being. I'm dripping with desire, wetness coating my thighs as he takes me relentlessly from behind. "Please don't stop," I beg breathlessly, pushing my hips back to meet his thrusts.

"I couldn't even if I wanted to," Nickolas groans, gripping my hips with his other hand as he drives into me with the need to remind me who owns my body. My eyes roll back in ecstasy, and I can feel my release building, the coil inside me winding tighter and tighter with each snap of his hips.

Nickolas thrusts into me again and again, building my release to dizzying heights. My toes curl, and my hands fist the sheets, desperate for something to hold onto as pleasure overwhelms me. I'm right on the edge, my body tensing in anticipation of the impending orgasm.

"I'm so close," I whimper, my inner walls starting to flutter around his thick length. "Make me come, Daddy. I need it."

Nickolas suddenly stills and pulls out. I feel him spill his own release on my back with a low groan. Panting, I turn my head, a pang of disappointment and frustration hitting me as I realize he's left me hanging, my own climax cruelly ripped away at the last second. Nickolas is already getting dressed, tucking himself back into his pants.

"Nickolas..." I say breathlessly, an unspoken plea in my voice. But he ignores me, his expression impassive as he buttons his shirt. "Nickolas, please..." I try again, squirming against the ache between my thighs, desperate for relief. He turns to look at me then, his eyes raking over my naked, trembling form. He licks his lips, desires warring with dominance in his gaze. He walks over to me and undoes the belt.

"Next time, when I give you an order, you obey," he says sternly. "And if I find out you finished yourself off while I'm gone, I will punish you again." With that, he turns on his heel and walks out, leaving me gaping after him in disbelief.

I can't believe he just did that—worked me up to the brink of orgasm only to deny me and leave. He could have punished me in any other way—spanked me even—but instead, he's left me hanging. The urge to reach between my legs and find my own release is overwhelming, the ache of unfulfilled arousal throbbing insistently. But I don't dare disobey him, not after that warning.

Groaning in frustration, I squeeze my thighs together, trying to ease the ache, but the slightest movement has me teetering on the edge again. Nickolas has absolutely wrecked me, leaving my body primed and desperate. I don't know how I'm going to survive until he allows me to cum. His dominance, his control over my pleasure, is maddening...and incredibly hot.

I make my way to the bathroom, intending to shower and clean up. As I look at the showerhead, an idea pops into my head, fueled by the still-aching need for release.

"Don't do it," Marie's voice echoes in my head.

"He won't know," I counter silently.

"He will, trust me," she insists.

"I hate you," I reply petulantly, though there's no real heat behind the words, just a playful defiance as I sever our connection.

She's right, though. Nickolas would know somehow. I give up the idea with a sigh and step into the shower. While cleaning my body of his cum on my back, my mind drifts to our conversation earlier.

Nickolas had avoided discussing his scars in more depth by initiating sex. I would have pushed for more, but knowing that simply confessing to being raped must have been incredibly difficult for him. Vulnerability doesn't come easily to him. I'll find the right moment to encourage him to open up more.

At the same time, my heart swells, remembering how he alluded to his growing feelings for me, even if he couldn't say the words directly. I already knew I was falling for him, but knowing he feels the same gives my heart the reassurance it needs to acknowledge my own feelings.

I know without a doubt that he means the world to me now. But with these emotions come challenges. I can't ignore the fact that a future together still seems impossible. Tears well in my eyes as I imagine a life without Nickolas; the mere thought of it is devastating. I have no idea how we could make a future work, but I'm determined to find a way. I know for that to happen, Nickolas needs to let go of his vendetta against my father. I'm not sure how I'm going to achieve that, but I'm willing to try. I can't afford to give up before giving it my all.

I step out of the bathroom, still aching between my legs. I get dressed in one of his T-shirts. I lie down in bed and wait for him. I doubt he'll leave me hanging for long, so I wait until, unfortunately, sleep claims me.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

NICKOLAS

I step out of my room, a sly smile tugging at the corners of my mouth as I recall the look on Amelia's face moments ago. The way her eyes widened in surprise, the flush of disappointment that stained her cheeks when she realized I wasn't going to let her cum...it was everything. Fuck! That woman will be the death of me, I think ruefully, shaking my head as I make my way toward the stairs.

As I descend down to my office, my thoughts drift back to our earlier conversation, to the way Amelia had reacted when I'd finally given voice to what happened to me. I still can't quite believe how well she took the news, how she didn't recoil in disgust like I'd always feared.

I know she only let the subject drop because she could sense how difficult it was for me to speak of, and for that, I'm more grateful than I can put into words. As much as I want to be open with her, to lay myself bare in every sense...revisiting that time in my life is like picking at a scab that's never fully healed, exposing the festering wound beneath to the harsh light of day.

But Amelia...she proved to me today that she can handle the truth, no matter how ugly or painful it might be. That she won't turn away from me, won't see me as broken or damaged beyond repair. And that knowledge, that quiet acceptance...it's everything to my battered soul in a way I never could have anticipated.

I'm just reaching for the handle of my office door when a familiar voice calls out from behind me, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Nickolas." I freeze, my hand hovering in midair as I recognize the stern, almost disapproving tone. Slowly, I turn to face my uncle, wondering why the fuck he just called me by my full name?

"Uncle," I greet him, inclining my head slightly as he approaches.

But as he draws near, I see his nostrils flare, his brow furrowing in a deep frown that sends a tendril of unease slithering down my spine.

"You reek of her scent," he says bluntly, his lip curling in distaste.

I swallow hard, feeling my throat clog at words. Without a word, I push open the door to my office and gesture for him to enter. He brushes past me without another word, his shoulders stiff with barely contained anger as he strides into the room.

I follow close behind, my mind racing as I try to come up with some way to diffuse the situation before it can escalate any further. But before I can even make it to my desk, Uncle Leo's voice cuts through the tense silence, freezing me in my tracks. "Is it true what they say?" he asks, his tone deceptively mild despite the steel underlying the words.

I keep my back to him, my hands clenched into fists at my sides. "I already explained the rumors last time," I reply, my voice sounding hollow and unconvincing even to my own ears.

"I am your uncle, Nickolas," he snaps, his tone brooking no argument. "Such a stupid lie doesn't work on me."

I close my eyes, rubbing a weary hand over my face as I realize there's no getting out of this conversation. As much as I might wish otherwise, Uncle Leo is not going to let this go until he has the truth...no matter how much that truth might hurt us both. The fact that he brought it up today means he is determined to know where my heart lies.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the confrontation to come. Slowly, I turn to fully face Uncle Leo, but I can't quite bring myself to meet his piercing gaze. Instead, I fix my eyes on a point just over his shoulder.

The silence that stretches between us is heavy, weighted down by the weight of unspoken truths and unvoiced accusations. I can practically taste the tension in the air, thick and cloying like smoke from a wildfire.

Just when I think the quiet might shatter me into a million pieces, Uncle Leo speaks. But the words that leave his lips are not what I was expecting.

"It's true," he says, a note of stunned disbelief coloring his tone as he stares at me, eyes wide with shock. I stiffen at his words, the weight of them hitting me like a physical blow to the gut. I don't respond, don't give voice to either a confirmation or a denial. "Have you forgotten who she is, Nickolas?" he asks, taking a step toward

me with a look of growing horror on his face.

I flinch at the accusation, my jaw clenching as I force myself to meet his gaze head-on. "No, I haven't," I grit out, the words emerging from between clenched teeth. As if I could ever forget, even for a moment.

"I believe you have," Uncle Leo snarls, his voice rising with each word until he's practically shouting. "Because if you hadn't, you wouldn't be fucking in love with her!"

I reel back as if he's struck me, my heart seizing in my chest at the sheer venom in his tone. "I am not in love with her," I protest, but even I can hear the lack of conviction in my voice. Because the truth is...I don't know what I feel for Amelia. Not anymore. All I know is that the thought of losing her, of living in a world without her light...it's a prospect too bleak to even contemplate.

Uncle Leo barks out a harsh, mirthless laugh. "Really? You think you aren't in love with the bitch?"

Red tinges the edges of my vision at the slur, a growl rumbling up from deep in my chest before I can stop it. "Don't call her that," I warn, my hands curling into fists at my sides.

But Uncle Leo just shakes his head, a look of disgust twisting his features. "Wow, she even makes you growl at your own uncle," he sneers. "What's next? Will she make you give up on killing Nathaniel altogether? Or has she already convinced you to abandon our revenge?"

I suck in a sharp breath, feeling like I've been punched in the gut. Because as much as I might care for Amelia, as much as the thought of hurting her tears me apart inside...the idea of letting go of my vengeance, of allowing her father to live after everything he's done...it's unthinkable.

"My plans for Nathaniel haven't changed," I say, my voice low and dangerous. "Regardless of what you might think, I will see his heart ripped from his chest and watch the life drain from his eyes."

But even as the words leave my mouth, I can taste the lie on my tongue. Because the truth is...I don't know if I have it in me anymore. If I can look into Amelia's eyes, knowing the devastation my actions will bring her, and still follow through with it.

Uncle Leo must see the conflict in my eyes, the way my resolve wavers ever so slightly. Because in the next moment, he's turning on his heel and striding toward the door, his expression grim and determined.

"She's proven to be nothing but a hindrance," he says coldly, not even bothering to look back at me as he reaches for the handle. "And that's why I'm going to kill her. Right now."

For a moment, I can only stare at him in mute horror, my mind struggling to process the words. But then the reality of what he's saying hits me like a freight train, and I'm moving before I even realize it, throwing myself between him and the door with a snarl of pure, unadulterated rage.

"You are not killing Amelia," I growl, my voice barely recognizable as I stare him down with a look that would have lesser men quaking in their boots.

But Uncle Leo just meets my gaze steadily. "I am," he says simply. "And from your reaction, I can see it's the best decision."

He tries to step around me, but I move with him, blocking his path at every turn. "You. Are. Not. Killing. Amelia," I repeat through gritted teeth, each word emerging as a barely contained roar.

Uncle Leo shakes his head slowly, a look of profound disappointment settling over his features. "You love her so much, you would go against me?" he asks softly, his voice laced with a quiet sort of disbelief. "Against your own family?"

I close my eyes, feeling the weight of his disappointment settling heavily upon my shoulders. Uncle Leo means the world to me, and despite the conflicting emotions swirling within me, I cannot bring myself to harbor anger toward him for his intentions toward Amelia.

Taking a deep breath, I steel myself, knowing that I must act swiftly to calm him down and sway his resolve to spare Amelia's life.

"Uncle Leo," I say softly. "She's my mate."

He flinches as if I've burned him, his eyes flashing with fury. "You think I don't fucking know that?" he roars, his voice echoing off the walls like a clap of thunder. "I know she's your mate, Nickolas. And that's exactly why she has to die."

"No!" I yell, the words bursting forth from me like a dam breaking, my heart constricting painfully in my chest. Emotions surge within me like a raging storm, the weight of the situation pressing down upon me like a suffocating blanket.

"She has to die," he says, his tone almost gentle despite the steel underlying the words. "If she remains breathing, our revenge will never come to pass. You know this, Nickolas. Deep down, you know

it's true."

I want to argue, to rail against the unfairness of it all. But I can't seem to find the words, can't seem to force them past the lump of emotion lodged in my throat.

Because as much as it kills me to admit it...he's right. As long as Amelia lives, as long as she holds such sway over my heart...I will never be able to follow through with the revenge. Never be able to look into her eyes and watch the light die as I rip away everything she holds dear.

And that knowledge, that soul-deep certainty...it's a betrayal of everything I've ever fought for, everything I've sacrificed to get to this point. A betrayal of the memory of my father, of the promise I made to avenge his death no matter the cost.

But even as that realization settles like a lead weight in my gut, I know I can't let Uncle Leo do this. Can't stand by and watch as he snuffs out the one bright spot in my endless existence, the one person who makes me feel like maybe, just maybe...there's still hope for me yet.

"Give me time," I rasp out, my voice raw and broken as I stare at Uncle Leo. "Please, Uncle. Just...give me a little more time to figure this out."

He shakes his head, a look of grim determination settling over his features. "Time is the one thing we don't have," he says softly, almost regretfully. "Every moment she remains alive is another chance for you to fall deeper under her spell."

I open my mouth to protest, to argue that Amelia isn't some sorceress who has bewitched me, but Uncle Leo cuts me off with a sharp gesture. "I'm sorry, Nickolas," he says, and for a moment, I almost believe he means it. "But this is the way it has to be." And with that, he's shoving past me with a burst of vampire speed, his hand reaching for the door handle before I can even blink.

"No!" The word tears itself from my throat in a ragged scream, and I lunge after him, my own preternatural reflexes kicking into high gear as I throw myself between him and the door once more.

We collide with a sickening crack of bone on bone, our bodies slamming into the heavy oak with enough force to rattle the hinges. For a moment, we simply grapple with each other, our faces inches apart as we strain and struggle for dominance.

But in the end, I am the stronger of us. The faster, the more ruthless. And with a final, wrenching twist, I manage to pin Uncle

Leo against the wall, my forearm pressed against his throat in a chokehold that would snap a human's neck like a twig.

"I said," I snarl, my voice barely recognizable through the haze of rage and desperation clouding my vision, "give me time to figure this out."

Uncle Leo stares at me, his eyes wide and disbelieving. "Nickolas, she's your mate," he says, his tone almost gentle despite the steel underlying the words. "I don't blame you for falling for her. But you need to let me do this."

"No!" I yell, tightening my grip on his throat until he's gasping for air.

"Nickolas!" he roars, the force of his voice rattling the paintings and pictures on the walls.

"My answer is still no!" I growl back, my own voice rising to match his as the frames shake and clatter to the ground.

We stare at one another, chests heaving with the force of our anger. The air between us is thick with tension, the weight of centuries of loyalty and love straining against the impossible choice I now face.

For a long, tense moment, neither of us speaks. And then, slowly, Uncle Leo lifts his hand in a gesture of surrender. I hesitate for a heartbeat, my instincts screaming at me not to let my guard down. But the look in his eyes, the weariness and resignation...it's enough to make me loosen my grip, to step back and let him go.

Uncle Leo turns and strides out of the room without another word, his footsteps echoing like gunshots in the sudden silence. I wait until I can no longer hear his retreating steps before I allow myself to sag against the door, my forehead pressing against the cool wood as I try to calm the frantic pounding of my heart.

After a moment, I straighten up and make my way upstairs to my room, my steps heavy with the weight of the confrontation. As I push open the door, my gaze immediately seeks out the slumbering form of my mate, her body curled beneath the sheets like a contented cat.

Amelia looks so peaceful like this, her face relaxed and untroubled in sleep. The sight of her sends a wave of tenderness crashing over me.

"What will I do with you?" I murmur, more to myself than to her. But as if she can hear me, even in her dreams, her lips twitch and move, forming half-coherent words and phrases that I can't quite

make out.

Fuck, she's adorable. Even now, with the weight of Uncle Leo's ultimatum hanging over my head and the future of our relationship so uncertain...I can't help but feel a rush of affection for this woman who has somehow become the center of my entire world.

Slowly, careful not to wake her, I strip off my shirt and pants and slide into bed beside her. Right now, all I want is to forget about the events of the last few minutes. To lose myself in her warmth and pretend, if only for a little while, that we aren't doomed to a future of heartbreak and impossible choices.

So I gather Amelia close, burying my face in her hair and breathing in her sweet, familiar scent. And as I hold my mate securely in my arms, I can't help but pray to the heavens to somehow, someway...let us find a way through this.

Together.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

AMELIA

I wake up to the feeling of callous hands wrapping around my waist once more. Picking Nickolas's familiar scent in the air my heart immediately calms, knowing it’s him. Rolling over to face him, his lips capture mine in a searing kiss that steals the breath from my lungs.

His hand slips beneath the thin fabric of my shirt, cupping my breast and kneading the sensitive flesh until I arch shamelessly into his touch, a breathy moan escaping against his mouth. "Nickolas," I whimper, my body coming alive under his skilled fingers.

"For being daddy's good girl, you get a reward," he rumbles, his voice rough with desire. He pulls from my lips and tugs my shirt over my head and tosses it aside, his heated gaze raking over my exposed skin like a physical caress. I feel myself clench at the blatant want in his eyes, a fresh flood of arousal dampening my thighs.

"So fucking perfect," he praises before dipping his head to draw one aching peak into the wet heat of his mouth, his tongue swirling and teeth grazing until I'm writhing beneath him, my fingers tangling in his hair to hold him close. His other hand skates down my trembling stomach to slip beneath the waistband of my panties, the flimsy lace no match for his questing fingers as he tears them away.

"Daddy, please," I keen, my hips lifting in wanton invitation as he parts my slick folds, one long finger circling my entrance before plunging inside. My eyes slam shut on a gasp, my walls fluttering around the welcome intrusion as he starts to move, his thrusts slow

and deep. "More," I manage to rasp, my nails digging into his shoulders. "I need more."

He rewards me with a second finger, the delicious stretch and fullness stealing my breath as he curls them just right, stroking that spot that has me seeing stars. His mouth returns to my breasts, suckling and nipping, stoking the fire building low in my belly until it's an inferno threatening to consume me.

"Look at me," he commands softly, and I force my eyes open to meet his, nearly undone by the intensity I find there. "I want to watch you fall apart for me."

His fingers pick up speed, pumping into my dripping heat as his thumb finds my aching clit, rubbing tight circles that have me careening toward the edge embarrassingly fast. I'm panting now, my body drawn taut as a bowstring, every muscle quivering with the force of my impending release.

"Daddy," I whimper, my voice breaking on a sob. "I'm so close. Please don't stop."

But he does, his fingers stilling abruptly as he pulls away, leaving me empty and aching, teetering on the brink. A pathetic whine escapes my throat at the loss, my hips chasing his retreating touch. He chuckles darkly, the sound vibrating through me as he kneels between my parted thighs, his hands going to the fastenings of his pants.

"Patience, little one," he soothes, freeing his straining erection and giving it a lazy stroke. "I'm not nearly done with you yet."

Then he's covering my body with his own, the blunt head of his cock notching at my entrance as his lips find mine once more. With one powerful thrust of his hips, he's inside me, filling and stretching me so perfectly that I cry out, my nails raking down the flexing muscles of his back.

He sets a punishing rhythm, driving into me again and again until the only sounds are the slap of skin on skin and our mingled moans and gasps. I can feel my orgasm building again, the coil in my core winding tighter with every stroke, my thighs beginning to shake.

"That's it, little one," Nickolas pants against my ear, his hips snapping harder, faster. "Come for me. Let me feel you."

His words are my undoing, and I shatter with a wordless cry, my release crashing over me in wave after wave of mind-numbing ecstasy. He follows me over the edge with a guttural groan, his hips

stuttering as he spills himself deep inside me, the heat of his seed prolonging my pleasure until I'm boneless and spent beneath him.

He pulls out of me and moves to leave, a sudden panic seizes me. Without thinking, my hand shoots out to grab his arm, desperate to keep him close.

"I'm not going anywhere, little one," Nickolas reassures me, his voice a soothing balm to my frayed nerves. He settles back down beside me, strong arms wrapping around my trembling body and pulling me tight against his solid warmth.

I curse myself silently for the clingy, needy gesture, hating how vulnerable it makes me feel. Yet at the same time, a profound relief washes over me, knowing he's not leaving.

"Nickolas..." I whisper, laying my head on his broad chest. The steady thump of his heartbeat beneath my cheek is comforting.

"Hmm?" he hums in response, fingers threading gently through my hair. The tender touch sends pleasant shivers down my spine, soothing and arousing all at once.

I hesitate, my lip caught between my teeth as the words linger on the tip of my tongue. I yearn for him to share the full story with me, yet I fear pushing him away by pressing too hard. "You know we need to talk about it, right?" I finally muster, my voice barely more than a whisper, tinged with uncertainty.

He presses a soft kiss to my forehead, his lips lingering on my skin. "I know," he murmurs. "I promise I will tell you the whole story one day. But for now, sleep, little one. I want you well-rested before our next round." There's a hint of wicked promise in his tone that sends heat curling low in my belly.

Sighing, I burrow deeper into his embrace and let my eyes drift closed, surrendering to the pull of exhaustion, letting the darkness take me away.

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The following morning, I wake to an empty bed, Nickolas nowhere to be found. A pang of disappointment twinges in my chest, but it’s quickly soothed by the sight of a sticky note on the lamp informing me that he’s gone to court.

I make my way to the bathroom, wincing slightly at the soreness between my thighs. Heat flushed my cheeks, remembering the reason for it. Nickolas woke me with hungry kisses, taking me again and again in positions that left me breathless and my body

deliciously sore.

Stepping into the shower, I shake my head to clear vivid memory. The hot spray soothes my aching muscles, eliciting a contented sigh.

After a steamy shower, I dress and make my way to the kitchen in search of food, my stomach grumbling insistently. Beatrice is at the stove, and I press a quick kiss to her cheek in greeting before perching on one of the stools. “Here you go, child,” she says warmly, setting a plate heaped with fluffy scrambled eggs in front of me.

“Thank you,” I murmur, already digging in. An unfamiliar lightness dances within me this morning. Beatrice pauses on her way back to the stove, studying me intently for a long moment before shaking her head with a knowing look that makes me feel a little embarrassed. My cheeks flush with warmth. I can tell she’s aware of what Nickolas and I did last night, and while this isn’t the first time she’s guessed it, I still can’t help but feel a little shy.

“When does Nickolas usually finish at court?” I ask between bites, trying for nonchalance.

“He should be done and heading to his office,” Beatrice replies.

“Really?” The cutlery clatters to my plate as excitement sparks through me. Without a second thought, I’m on my feet and heading for the door.

“Finish your food first, at least!” Beatrice calls after me, exasperated fondness lacing her voice.

“Next time!” I toss over my shoulder, already out the door, and hurry toward Nickolas’s office with anticipation thrumming through my veins.

I arrive just as Nickolas is turning the doorknob to his office. A warm smile spreads across his face when he sees me, and he steps inside, pulling me in after him. The second we’re inside, he has me pinned against the door, one hand capturing my wrists above my head while the other snakes around my waist to pull me flush against him.

“Good morning, little one,” he murmurs, nuzzling into the crook of my neck. His warm breath sends delicious shivers racing down my spine.

“Morning,” I breathe out, a giddy smile tugging at my lips.

“How was your night?” He slides his hand boldly under the hem of my dress, calloused fingers trailing up the bare skin of my thigh,

his touch igniting sparks of need low in my belly. I gasp as his lips find that sensitive spot just behind my ear, leaving a blazing path in their wake.

"Good," I manage, my eyes rolling back briefly before flying open again as his wandering hand grazes the edge of my panties. I quickly trap his wrist, stilling his teasing caress. "We need to talk."

He lets out a heavy sigh, his forehead dropping to rest against mine as disappointment rolls off him in waves. "I know."

A soft kiss brushes the tip of my nose before he reluctantly pulls away. I make my way to the couch, patting the space beside me in invitation. Nickolas follows with an adorable pout, his expression so endearingly petulant that butterflies take wing in my belly. He's never looked cuter. Unable to help myself, I press a quick peck to those sulking lips the moment he sits down. He frowns, knowing exactly why I did it, and the sight only makes me want to kiss him again. So I do, lingering just a beat longer this time.

"If you fucking kiss me again, I'll bend you over this couch and fuck you until you can't walk," he growls, the rough promise in his voice sending a molten thrill straight to my core. I squeeze my thighs together, trying to temper the insistent throbbing between my legs.

"Okay, I'll stop," I murmur, as much as part of me desperately wants him to make good on that delicious threat. We need to talk.

He sighs, running a hand through his tousled hair as he leans back against the cushions. "What exactly do you want to talk about?" he asks, his arm coming up to wrap around my waist and tugging me flush against his side as his fingers trace idle patterns along my arm. I go willingly, curling into him and resting my head on his shoulder.

"Us," I reply simply.

"What about us?" The teasing caress of his fingertips dances higher, leaving tingling trails of awareness in their wake.

"Nickolas, you know what I mean." I capture his other hand, twining our fingers together to still his maddening movements.

He lets out another heavy sigh. "I do, little one, but can we talk about it another time? It's just…too complicated."

"I thought you were finally ready to discuss it," I protest, pulling back to face him directly.

"No, I thought you wanted to continue our conversation from yesterday."

“Oh.” Disappointment lances through me, but I push it down, forcing myself to nod in understanding.

I slump back against his side, our joined hands falling into my lap. “I’m ready whenever you are,” I say, giving him a reassuring squeeze, silently encouraging him to open up to me. He takes a deep, fortifying breath, his restless stroking stilling.

“As I said, I was raped, and that doesn’t fully explain how I got these scars. To understand, I need to tell you my story from the beginning. My mother was one of the king’s human sex slaves, young and beautiful. When she ended up pregnant with his child—me—he knew she had to escape before I was born because his mate and my wretched stepmother, Jane, hadn’t conceived by then. Desperate, she fled into the night, leaving everything behind to give me a chance at freedom and to save me from Jane’s inevitable wrath if I were born in the castle.

For five precious years, we had a small taste of happiness, though always glancing over our shoulders. Then Jane finally tracked us down. She threw us into a dank, lightless cell, more tomb than prison. Every day, she visited to rain blows upon my mother’s wasting body, beating her till her once lovely face was mottled with bruises and blood. The guards took their turns with her as well, violating her in the vilest ways till she mercifully passed out from the agony.

As a small child, all I could do was clean her wounds with trembling hands and ragged strips of cloth, my tears mingling with her blood. I would curl up beside her on the filthy straw, trying to will some of my warmth and life into her broken form. This hellish existence was all I knew for years that felt like centuries.

When I was ten, one of Jane’s guards took a liking to me. The way his cold, piggish eyes followed me made my skin crawl. He asked Jane if he could have me, like I was a thing to be owned. Though she refused, he returned later in secret to rip me from my mother’s skeletal arms. She fought for me, tooth and nail, like a wildcat defending her only cub, but it was futile and cost her her life.

Even then, I wouldn’t submit to him. I kicked and clawed and bit, fighting with every last shred of my strength. In return, he whipped me until the lash flayed open my back until I was painted red with my own blood. The warm, wet heat of it was sickeningly familiar. Then, the true nightmare began. He used my own blood

to…” He stops.

“No!” The word rips from my throat, raw and ragged. I spin to face Nickolas, my mouth hanging open in horror, eyes wide with disbelief.

“Yes,” he confirms, swallowing hard against the painful truth lodged in his throat.

Tears well up in my eyes, blurring my vision. From the moment he began his wrenching tale, they gathered like storm clouds, heavy with sorrow and empathy. Now, they spill over in relentless waves, tracking scalding trails down my cheeks. I can’t stem the flood any more than I can comprehend the depravity he’s endured.

The image of a small, innocent child—of Nickolas—witnessing and enduring such unspeakable things shatters something deep inside me. The idea of someone so young, so vulnerable, being subjected to that level of trauma and abuse is incomprehensible. Soul-destroying.

I weep for that little boy, for all that was ripped away from him, for the cruel, vicious marks carved into his skin and psyche. I weep for the bright light that must have been snuffed out in his eyes, for the gaping wounds that can never fully heal.

“I haven’t even gotten to the worst of it yet,” Nickolas murmurs, his voice a deep rumble beneath my ear. I stiffen, a fresh wave of dread crashing over me.

Turning my head around to meet his gaze, I search his face with red-rimmed eyes. “It gets worse?” I manage to choke out, my voice thick and wavering.

He gives me a sad, rueful smile. “Not much more so, but please, don’t cry for me, little one. I survived. I’m here now, with you.”

The tenderness in his expression only makes my heart ache more sharply. I wind my arms around his neck and shift closer, straddling his lap. I need to feel him, warm and vital and alive, not the ghost of the brutalized child he once was. Nickolas’s hands come to rest on my hips, his touch gentle but grounding.

“I’m sorry,” I choke out, fresh tears filling my eyes. “I’m so sorry, Nickolas.”

“It’s okay, little one.” His arms tighten around me in a grounding embrace. “Do you want me to continue?”

I pull back just far enough to search his eyes, seeing the strength it takes for him to relive those horrors. I give a solemn nod, nestling back against his chest and winding my arms around his solid frame,

determined to anchor him with my love and support as he reveals the rest of his haunting tale.

Nickolas's voice is flat, almost detached, as he continues. "Jane was furious when she discovered my mother had died, but there was nothing she could do. The guard lied, claiming we had tried to escape, and that's why he killed her. Jane just looked at me, battered and broken, and slapped me hard across the face. 'I'll wait for you to grow up, boy,' she hissed. 'Then you'll take your mother's place in every way.'"

A shudder runs through him at the memory, and I tighten my arms around his neck, trying to anchor him in the present.

"I didn't see her again for five years, but that guard visited me every single night. No matter how hard I fought back, he would just laugh and whip me until I swear I could feel the lash scraping against my bare bones. By the time I turned fifteen, I was getting too old for his tastes. But I was the perfect age for Jane."

Nickolas's jaw clenches, a muscle ticking beneath the stubble. "She came to me every day, inflicting all the pain and degradation she had wanted to visit on my mother. The fact that I had the gall to look like my father, the king, only made it worse. She beat me just like her guard did until I was more blood and bruises than skin. That was my waking nightmare, day after day until I turned eighteen."

Tears burn my eyes as I listen, my heart cracking anew for the boy he was. I burrow closer, curling into his chest as if I can somehow shield him retroactively from the horrors he endured. "I'm so sorry," I whisper, my words muffled against his shirt. "I can't even imagine... I'm just so sorry." No wonder he hates Jane with such vehemence.

Nickolas says nothing, but I feel his lips brush the top of my head in silent acknowledgment.

After a moment, I ask softly, "Is that what caused the scars? The constant whippings?"

"Yes," he confirms, a hard edge to his voice. "Especially since the whip was laced with oak tree venom."

I shudder at the thought, knowing how the caustic sap of the oak tree venom can keep even the deepest wounds from healing cleanly. "How did you finally get out of there? What changed?"

Pulling back just enough to meet his gaze, I search his face. I can't fathom how he went from that unrelenting hell to being

crowned king.

A ghost of a smile flits across his lips. “That’s the next part of the story. I told you how I was getting too old to interest Jane’s guard anymore. I was still too weak to escape on my own, with her torturing me every day. But then the guard brought in a new victim, Eric, who was a human at the time.”

Nickolas’s eyes go distant, seeing into the past. “He threw Eric into the cell next to mine and started in on him, just like he had with me. I wanted to help, but I couldn’t even help myself. Then, one day, Eric figured out what I was. He started secretly feeding me his blood, letting me drink from his wrist when the guards weren’t looking. It gave me strength, letting me heal faster. And finally, I was strong enough. I broke us out, and we just ran. Ran until we both dropped, more dead than alive, at the foot of a cabin. My uncle’s cabin.”

Wonder and old pain war in his expression. “He took one look at me and knew exactly who my father was. He brought me back to the castle, to the king. I never told my father the truth of what his mate did to me. She threatened to tell the entire court how I’d been defiled, and I was so ashamed of what had happened, even though I knew it wasn’t my fault. So I kept quiet.”

I let out a shaky breath, trying to comprehend the enormity of what he’s shared. “Did you ever get revenge on them? Jane and her guard?”

Nickolas’s smile is cold and sharp as a blade. “Yes. Eric helped me kill the guard.”

“And your father?” I ask hesitantly. “Do you blame him at all for not protecting you?”

“No,” he says firmly, shaking his head. “He was eaten up with guilt when he found out I existed and what I’d been through. He never once made me feel lesser for being a bastard. If anything, some say he loved me even more than my half-brother, trying to make up for lost time.”

Relief loosens some of the tightness in my chest. At least he had that, after everything.

“Amelia.” Nickolas’s voice draws me from my thoughts. I lift my head to find him watching me intently, his gaze lit with grim determination. “I need to see your father, little one. And I know you can make that happen.”

My breath stalls in my lungs as I stare at my mate, stunned and

uncertain. I have no idea how to respond to such an unexpected request, my mind reeling.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

I part my lips to respond, but the door suddenly bursts open behind us. I scramble off Nickolas's lap as he shoots to his feet, both of us whirling to see who has barged in so abruptly.

"Nickolas!" Eric's voice rings out, slightly breathless, as he holds the door open. His eyes are bright with urgency and...excitement.

"What is it? Who did you find?" Nickolas demands, his entire body thrumming with tense anticipation.

"Little one..." He crosses the space between us in two long strides, his hands coming up to cup my face. His palms are rough, calloused from years of hard work, but his touch is gentle, almost reverent. "I'm so sorry. I'll be back before you know it. I promise."

I can see the excitement in his eyes to finally have a lead on Lord Easterlin. My heart swells with a profound warmth to witness Nickolas's steadfast resolution to find Lord Easterlin—something I never dared dream of seeing from him.

A small, reassuring smile curves my lips. "It's alright. Can I head over to Lily's?" I ask, understanding his need to pursue this breakthrough. Nickolas gives a sharp nod.

"Yes, I'll assign some guards to accompany you," he affirms, his protective instincts kicking in to ensure my safety.

"Thank you."

Nickolas leans in, his forehead brushing mine as his thumb strokes my cheekbone. "Stay safe, little one," he murmurs, then presses one achingly tender kiss to my forehead before pulling away.

I watch him go, his broad shoulders disappearing through the door as Eric leads the way. I head out and make my way to Lily's.

When I arrive, I find her upstairs as I did last time, tucked up in bed with the human "television" show she's so fond of playing in the background. She greets me with a warm smile, scooting over to make room as she pats the mattress in invitation.

"Here, have a grape," she offers, holding out the bowl of fresh fruit resting beside her as I settle onto the bed.

I accept one of the plump purple globes with a murmured "Thank you," popping it into my mouth as I try to gather my swirling thoughts.

"What brings you by?" Lily asks her attention still mostly on the flickering screen. I take a deep, steadying breath, the weight of what I'm about to ask her settling heavily in the pit of my stomach.

"Where are they?"

Lily's head whips around so fast I'm surprised she doesn't get whiplash. Her eyes are wide, almost comically so. "I thought you felt it was safer not to know their location," she says carefully.

"I did..." My throat works as I try to find the right words. "I still do, in a way. But something happened. Nickolas...he asked to see Dad." Lily's perfectly arched brows furrow in confusion.

"He asked to see your father?"

I nod, then hurry to explain when she opens her mouth again. "He knows he's alive, Lily. I think he's known for a while now. I don't know how, but he knows, and he even knows we are related, thanks to our striking resemblance."

Lily runs her hands through her hair. "Oh heavens above! I can't believe he knew all along and didn't say anything!"

"I know; you should have seen my face yesterday when he spoke about knowing we were cousins," I say wryly. "But that's beside the point now. What happened today is why I've changed my mind about knowing where they are."

Lily regards me shrewdly. "I don't understand, Amelia. Do you really want to tell Nickolas where your father is hiding?" I hesitate, feeling uncharacteristically uncertain.

"I...I don't know."

"Then why are you even asking me?" she presses.

"Because..." I release a shuddering breath, struggling to put my jumbled feelings into words. "You didn't hear the way he asked me, Lily. He said he needed to see my father. Needed." I shake my head slowly, still trying to process the weight behind that simple word. "He didn't demand I tell him, didn't threaten to use you against me.

He asked Lily. He fucking asked." Lily's mouth drops open in a perfect “o” of shock.

"Oh heavens above..."

"I know," I whisper, blinking rapidly against the sudden sting of tears. "I can't think of any other reason he would have phrased it like that unless..."

"Are you sure that's why?" Lily asks, her voice hushed.

"No," I admit, swiping at the treacherous tear that escapes to trail down my cheek. "But I can't imagine why else he would say it like that." Lily claps her hands over her mouth, eyes wide with shock and...wonder?

"I'm speechless." A light chuckle escapes my lips.

"I'm not surprised."

Lily's eyes return to their normal size, but now they hold a glimmer of pity. That look only brings more tears to my own eyes. The mere thought of being wrong about his reason would shatter my heart into jagged pieces, and Lily knows it.

"Oh, come here." She opens her arms in a wordless invitation, and I practically collapse into her comforting embrace. She strokes my hair soothingly as more tears leak from my eyes, the dam of pent-up emotion finally cracking. "I know you wish more than anything to be right about his reasons," Lily murmurs. "But what if he said those exact words just to make you think so?"

Her words send a sharp pang through my chest. As much as I want to deny it, I can't entirely dismiss the possibility that she's right.

"That's one of the reasons I want to speak with him again before taking any action," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. "I need to be absolutely certain his intentions are what I hope they are before I even consider setting up a meeting." Lily nods in approval.

"A wise precaution. And if his reasons do prove true..." She squeezes my hand tightly. "Then we can pick a location favorable to your father. Somewhere, he will feel safe and in control of the situation."

"Yes, exactly." I return the pressure of her grip, drawing strength from her quiet confidence. "I pray we're right about this, cousin. I can't help but hope..."

"Me too." Lily leans in to press a gentle kiss on my forehead. "Me too."

As I settle back against the pillows, I can't shake the profound

sense that everything is about to change. For good or ill, the course has been set in motion. I can only hope and pray that the light I've glimpsed in the darkness is the dawn of a new beginning, not a fleeting mirage fated to vanish like a dream.

•••

I spend the day with Lily before returning to the castle late at night. As I step into our shared bedroom, I freeze, my breath catching in my throat at the sight before me. Nickolas stands with his back to me, his sculpted body bare as he strips off his clothes, the fabric dark and heavy with what can only be blood. He turns slowly as if sensing my presence, and I feel my knees weaken at the sight of his chest and abdomen that's painted red, the blood still wet and glistening in the dim light.

"Like what you see?" he asks, his voice a low, cocky drawl that sends shivers down my spine.

"No," I lie, tearing my gaze away, my cheeks flushing hot.

"Hmm," he smirks, clearly seeing through my feeble attempt at nonchalance. To my surprise, he doesn't stop undressing, his movements deliberate and sensual as he unzips his fly and sheds his stained pants and boxers. I can't help but stare, my core clenching with need at the glorious sight of my mate naked before me, all hard muscle and tanned skin.

"How was your day?" I manage to choke out, my voice sounding distant and hollow to my own ears.

"It was good, little one," Nickolas purrs, suddenly right in front of me, backing me up against the closet wall with the heat of his body. I collide with the hard surface, my lips parting with a gasp as I lift my eyes to meet his, drowning in the intensity of his gaze.

In the next heartbeat, his mouth is on mine, claiming me with a searing kiss that steals the breath from my lungs. My arms wind around his neck of their own accord, pulling him closer as I deepen the kiss, my tongue delving past his lips to taste him, and sets my senses on fire.

Nickolas's hands are everywhere, caressing and teasing, leaving trails of heat in their wake. Before I can even process what's happening, my dress is gone, my panties quick to follow. I moan into his mouth as he lifts me effortlessly, encouraging me to wrap my legs around his waist, the hard length of him pressing insistently against my aching core.

His lips leave mine to blaze a trail down the column of my throat, his teeth and tongue worshipping my sensitive skin until I'm writhing in his arms, desperate for more. My nipples tighten almost painfully as he reaches behind me to unclasp my bra with deft fingers, freeing my breasts to his hungry gaze.

"Nickolas," I whimper, arching into his touch as he takes one peaked nipple into his mouth, the wet heat of his tongue sending bolts of pleasure straight to my core. His hand finds my other breast, kneading and plucking at the sensitive flesh until I'm mindless with need, my head thrown back against the wall as I push myself deeper into his mouth, silently begging for more.

"Your body was made for me to worship, little one," Nickolas growls against my skin, his words vibrating through me like a physical caress. He releases my legs, letting my feet find the floor again before dropping to his knees before me, his face level with my dripping center.

"Let me show you how," he commands, his voice rough with desire as he lifts one of my legs to drape over his broad shoulder, opening me fully to his darkened gaze.

"Nickolas, please..." I keen, my fingers threading through his hair to pull him closer, desperate to feel his mouth on me.

"So fucking perfect," he praises, his breath hot against my sensitive flesh. And then his mouth is on me, his tongue delving deep to lap at my juices, his lips and teeth pulling my throbbing clit into the wet cavern of his mouth to suckle mercilessly.

I cry out at the intense pleasure, my eyes slamming shut as I feel my release building deep in my core, my arousal dripping down my thighs to coat his chin. Nickolas doesn't let up, alternating between long, slow licks and quick, targeted flicks of his tongue until I'm shaking and incoherent, my fingers tightening in his hair as I hurtle toward the edge.

"That's it, little one. Cum for me," he coaxes, his voice a dark rumble that pushes me over the precipice. I shatter with a hoarse scream, my body convulsing as wave after wave of ecstasy crashes over me, leaving me boneless and trembling in his arms.

Nickolas rises to his feet, his lips and chin glistening with my juices as he licks them clean with a wicked smirk.

"Kneel," he commands, his tone brooking no argument, sending a fresh gush of arousal flooding my core.

I sink to my knees without hesitation, my mouth level with his

impressive length. He doesn't give me any warning, fisting a hand in my hair and guiding me forward until the blunt head of his cock pushes past my lips, filling my mouth and throat with his thick length.

"Suck daddy like the little slut you know you are," he growls, his grip on my hair tightening as he begins to move my mouth against his dick fast, setting a brutal pace that has tears springing to my eyes. I hollow my cheeks and relax my throat, taking him as deep as I can, sucking him off, and loving every minute of it.

Nickolas groans above me, my name falling from his lips like a prayer as I work him closer and closer to his release, my own arousal building again at the knowledge that I can bring this powerful male to his knees with just my mouth. Just as I feel him start to throb against my tongue, he pulls me off with a hiss, his chest heaving with the effort of holding back.

"I want to cum inside you," he rasps, using his grip on my hair to pull me to my feet, his eyes wild and hungry as they rake over my flushed body. "Mine," he snarls, the word a possessive brand against my skin as he backs me into the wall once more, lifting me effortlessly to wrap my legs around his waist.

I cling to his shoulders, my nails digging into his sweat-slicked skin as he notches himself at my entrance, teasing me with the promise of his thick length. "Please, Nickolas." I whimper, my hips rolling against him in wanton invitation. He answers with a single, powerful thrust, sheathing himself to the hilt in my tight heat, stretching and filling me so perfectly that I see stars. The blood on his chest smears against my breasts and belly as he begins to move, his hips snapping against mine in a relentless rhythm that steals the breath from my lungs and the thoughts from my head until all that exists is him and the exquisite pleasure building between us. "Nickolas," I keen, my release coiling tighter and tighter in my core with every deep stroke of his cock against my fluttering walls.

"Mine," he chants against my hair, his voice strained and desperate as he loses himself in my body, his thrusts becoming erratic and harsh as he chases our mutual completion. I shatter first, my orgasm hitting me like a freight train, my inner muscles clamping down on his length like a vice as I scream my pleasure into the sweat-dampened skin of his neck. Nickolas follows me over the edge with a guttural roar, his hips stuttering against mine as he fills me with his seed, the hot rush of his release triggering

aftershocks that leave me boneless and trembling in his arms. "Mine," he breathes again, softer this time, almost reverent, as he holds me close, his cum dripping down my thighs.

I try to find my footing, to pull away and stand on my own, but Nickolas's arms only tighten around me, refusing to let me go. "We need to shower," he says, his gaze lingering on our blood-stained bodies.

"I know. I wanted to walk to the bathroom," I explain, attempting to free myself from his embrace once more, but he holds on tightly. "What's wrong?" I inquire gently, reaching up to caress his face, seeking answers in his eyes. He's unusually clingy and possessive today. I loved how he called me his, but I couldn't help but notice he did quite a lot today.

"Nothing," he replies, but I can see the lie in the way he avoids my gaze, his jaw clenching beneath my fingers.

"Nickolas, talk to me," I plead.

"It's nothing, little one. Let's shower," he insists, turning his face into my palm to press a kiss against my skin before pulling away, leaving me feeling confused as he carries me into the bathroom. I decide not to push on and rest my head against his chest.

The hot spray of the shower envelops us as we make love again, our bodies moving together in a sensual dance. I cry out Nickolas's name as waves of pleasure crest over me for the second time in less than an hour.

As the steam swirls around us, beads of water trailing down the hard planes of his chest, Nickolas speaks in a low rumble. "I'm sorry for what I said the night we had sex." His dark eyes hold a hint of regret as the words tumble out.

I meet his gaze steadily, understanding dawning. "I forgive you." He must have panicked in that heated moment and lashed out with harsh words he didn't truly mean.

Nickolas lets out a slow exhale, some of the tension leaving his powerful frame. "And I only insisted you bathe afterward because I was worried about the lords finding out and making you a target." My brows knit together as I try to follow his meaning.

"I don't understand..."

He pulls me closer, big hands spanning my waist as he explains about the potential consequences if the lords were to discover we had sex and the danger it could bring down on me.

I feel the blood drain from my face as the weight of his words

sinks in. All this time, he was just trying to protect me in his own gruff way.

"Thank you...for explaining this to me," I murmur, rising up on my tiptoes to press a soft kiss to the rough stubble of his cheek. I know how difficult it must have been for him to open up and voice these vulnerabilities.

Nickolas simply holds me tighter, the thrumming of his heart under my cheek the only response he needs to give.

We emerge, clean and sated from the bathroom a few minutes later, and I pad into the closet to find something to wear, reaching for a pair of panties first.

"You won't be needing those," Nickolas says from behind me, plucking the scrap of lace from my fingers and tossing it back into the drawer with a smirk.

"Why?" I ask, my brow furrowing in confusion even as my core clenches at the heat in his gaze.

"Because they'll only be a hindrance when I'm hungry," he replies, his voice a low, suggestive rumble that sends shivers down my spine.

"Hungry?" I echo, tilting my head to the side in question. Understanding dawns a moment later, my cheeks flushing scarlet as I realize exactly what he means. I turn away quickly, pulling a soft t-shirt over my head to hide my burning face, my heart racing in my chest at the thought of being so open and available to him, always.

We climb into bed together, Nickolas pulling me flush against his side, his arm a solid band around my waist. I turn to face him, my fingers tracing the strong lines of his face in the dim light, marveling at the beauty of my mate.

"I'm listening," he murmurs, his hand sliding up my back in a soothing caress, his eyes soft and open as they meet mine.

"How did you know I have something to talk about?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper in the quiet room.

"It's written all over your face, little one," he replies, his fingers dancing along my spine, leaving trails of heat in their wake. "What's on your mind?"

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the conversation I know we need to have. "Earlier, you said you needed to see my father. Why?" I ask, my heart in my throat as I search his face for any hint of deception or ill intent.

Nickolas holds my gaze steadily, his expression serious but open. "What other reason could there be, little one?" he asks softly, his words heavy with unspoken meaning.

My heart stutters in my chest as I can't believe I was right.

"How can I be sure he'll leave there alive?" I whisper, giving voice to my deepest fear, the one that has been gnawing at me since Nickolas first made his request.

Nickolas releases my waist to capture my face in his hands, his thumbs brushing over my cheekbones in a tender caress. "If I wanted to harm him, I wouldn't have asked," he says solemnly, his eyes boring into mine with an intensity that steals the breath from my lungs.

Nickolas is asking me to trust him, and my heart wants to comply, but my brain is hesitant. His eyes convey sincerity. I exhale heavily and drop my head against his chest. I'm torn about what to do. Earlier, I was filled with happiness, but now that the moment of decision has arrived, reality hits me hard.

The thought of my father's death being my responsibility if I misjudged Nickolas's intentions weighs heavily on my mind. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself. Yet, I can't shake the anticipation of what their meeting might bring if things go smoothly. It could pave the way for a future with Nickolas.

"I trust our mate," Marie whispers in my mind.

"But what if he's just trying to get us to deliver Dad to him?" I argue.

"I don't think so, Amelia. Trust our mate this time."

"Hmm... I hope you're right," I respond before cutting off our connection.

I lift my head to meet Nickolas's gaze. "I'll arrange the meeting. They will choose the time and place. okay?"

"Fine with me, little one," he replies, smiling.

I lean back against his chest, silently praying that I've made the right decision.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

NICKOLAS

I gaze down at the beautiful woman sleeping peacefully in my arms. No one has ever looked so adorably serene while sleeping. The mere sight of Amelia calms my restless heart and soothes my battered soul. Gently, I brush away the lock of hair that has fallen across her face. She murmurs something unintelligible, her soft lips moving as she instinctively nuzzles closer into my warmth. Her sweet, intoxicating scent surrounds me, and I can't resist closing my eyes to simply breathe her in.

"I never thought I could want someone as much as I want you, Amelia," I whisper, the words seeming to spill from some hidden well deep within me. "The thought of a life without you has my heart aching...and it's funny because I didn't even think I had one until you came along."

The admission hangs in the air between us, fragile and raw. I wish I could say these words while looking into her beautiful eyes, but I'm not ready for that vulnerability yet. For now, it's enough just to give voice to the truth while she sleeps, unaware.

Carefully, I disentangle myself from her soft, pliant form, taking care not to wake her. I shower, dress up, and make my way to the throne room for court. Those meddlesome old busybodies haven't dared question our relationship again since I made it clear it was no mere dalliance. The fools actually believe it's all an act. If only they knew...

As I stride through the castle corridors, Eric falls into step beside me. "Well? What did she say?" he asks eagerly.

"She agreed," I reply, keeping my tone neutral. "Once the time

and location have been decided, I'll meet with her father."

Eric lets out a loud whoop, pumping his fist in the air like an overgrown child. I roll my eyes at his overexuberance. "Calm yourself. Her father may not be so quick to forgive and accept our terms."

"True..." Eric's smile fades somewhat as he considers my words. "But once he hears you speak of Amelia and sees how you feel about her, he'll know agreeing is the right decision." A flicker of doubt twists in my gut.

"I hope you're right..."

"Hope he's right about what, exactly?" My uncle's gruff voice cuts across our conversation.

I stiffen instinctively at the sound. "Nothing, Uncle."

Uncle Leo regards me with narrowed eyes for a long moment before shaking his head and continuing on into the throne room.

"Do you think he heard us?" Eric murmurs once we're out of earshot.

"Hardly. If he had, I would have gotten an earful already."

Eric nods, seeming reassured, and precedes me into the throne room. As is customary, I'm the last to enter and will be the first to depart once court has concluded.

The court meeting proceeds according to its typical routine. Various lords step forward to air grievances and report issues plaguing their respective covens. I listen attentively as each concern is raised, carefully considering the matters at hand. With a measured approach, I attempt to resolve the conflicts and troubles to the best of my ability, proposing reasonable solutions and compromises where I can. At one point, I feel the weight of my uncle's gaze upon me and turn to meet his assessing stare. Sadness glimmers in the depths of his eyes before he looks away, and a pang of guilt lances through me.

I knew why he looked at me like that. I didn't even need him to say a fucking word to know why. But what he doesn't understand is the soul-deep anguish my decision has cost me as well. Agreeing to bargain with the man who killed my father has been one of the most difficult choices of my life. I wish he could see the turmoil it has caused me, the guilt I've struggled with...but in the end, enduring a lifetime of guilt is a small price to pay if it means Amelia will be mine forever.

My tongue nearly burns with the urge to try to make him

understand. But I hold it firmly in check. Even if we were alone, I know my words would fall on deaf ears. In his eyes, Amelia will always be the enemy's daughter, nothing more. He's blinded to the truth—that she is my other half, my equal in all things, and the only queen I could ever want by my side.

"Your Majesty?" Eric's voice finally pierces the fog of my brooding thoughts. "The lords have finished their business. Did you have anything else to add?"

I shake my head, the motion seeming to dislodge the weight that had settled there. "No. Court is adjourned for today."

Rising from my throne, I take my leave, already counting down the hours until I can return to Amelia's warm embrace. I push aside the lingering doubts and misgivings, instead clinging to the belief that her father will ultimately make the right choice. That he'll see how utterly, inextricably bound his daughter's happiness is to mine...and find it within himself to give us his blessing.

He has to. Because I cannot fathom an existence without Amelia by my side. Not anymore. Not after letting her slip past the battered walls around my heart to awaken feelings I had thought long dead and buried.

My father wanted me to be happy above all else. Surely, he will understand the choice I have made and would wish for me to have this one thing I've never let myself hope for.

•••

The next few days pass in a blissful blur, my thoughts consumed by Amelia when we're apart and my body lost in hers when we're together. The connection between us has never felt stronger, the bond we share deepening with every passing moment.

But as things improve with my mate, my relationship with Uncle Leo only grows more strained. Ava frets that the rift between us may soon become irreparable. In a bid to bridge the widening gap, she invites me to join them for dinner—tonight of all nights, the very evening I'm set to finally meet Amelia's father. I agree, if only to quickly smooth things over with Leo so I can return to the castle and escort my mate to our fateful rendezvous.

The moment I step into the dining room, the tension is so thick it steals the air from my lungs. Ava greets me with a warm smile and a peck on the cheek, but Uncle Leo merely grunts as I take my seat, his eyes fixed on his plate.

“How have you been, Nick?” Ava asks, her tone overly bright as she tries to diffuse the crackling animosity. I force a smile, reaching for my wine glass.

“Good,” I reply, taking a fortifying sip. Ava’s answering smile is almost blinding.

“That’s wonderful to hear. Word around the castle is that you’ve been happier these days.” I nearly choke on the wine, sputtering as it goes down the wrong pipe.

“Sorry,” I rasp out, fumbling for a napkin. The maid is faster, whisking away the tablecloth to replace it.

“Are you alright, Nickolas?” Ava’s brow furrows with concern.

“Probably not,” Uncle Leo mutters darkly before I can respond.

I swallow hard, a muscle ticking in my jaw as I bite back the retort that springs to my tongue. Ava forges ahead, either oblivious to the simmering hostility or choosing to ignore it.

“So tell me, what’s been making you so happy lately?” Her eyes are alight with genuine curiosity.

Again, Uncle Leo cuts in before I can formulate a response. “I doubt he’d be willing to discuss it, seeing as he knows full well he has no right to pursue such happiness.” The words drip with acid, his contempt palpable.

Shock gives way to indignation, my hands clenching into fists beneath the table. “Excuse me?” I grit out, struggling to keep my temper in check. Uncle Leo turns the full force of his glare on me.

“You’re excused,” he says coldly. Something in me snaps, the tenuous hold on my control shattering.

“I never expected you to understand why I’m willing to live with this guilt for her. But I never thought I’d hear such utter bullshit spew from your mouth.” Uncle Leo barks out a harsh laugh.

“I can see she’s taught you to disrespect your elders. The Nickolas I knew before you started fucking that girl would never have dared speak to me this way.”

I open my mouth to reply, but Ava shoots me a pleading look, silently begging me not to engage further, and for her sake, I don’t.

“Why don’t we discuss something else?” Ava suggests, her voice strained and brittle as she tries to diffuse the tension.

“Fine,” Uncle Leo bites out, his jaw clenched so hard I’m surprised his teeth don’t shatter. Ava seizes on the momentary reprieve, her smile strained.

“How are things at court these days?”

“The same.” I force the words out through gritted teeth, my appetite vanishing. Uncle Leo’s lip curls in a sneer.

“That’s to be expected since you’ve decided not to make use of the little bitch.”

The world goes red around the edges, my vision tunneling. Before I can even process the movement, I have Uncle Leo slammed against the wall, my forearm pressed against his windpipe.

“Don’t you ever call her that again,” I snarl, my face mere inches from his. He smirks, completely unfazed by my show of aggression.

“I underestimated how thoroughly she has you under her control. She’s got you fucking pinning your own uncle to walls and snarling in his face now.”

“Don’t you fucking dare speak to me saying that bullshit when you understand nothing,” I hiss, shaking with barely contained rage.

“Then make me understand, Nickolas!” Leo roars back, his eyes blazing. “Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you’ve lost all sense of reason!” The words pour out of me in a torrent, unstoppable.

“She means everything to me, don’t you fucking get that? The thought of her shedding a single tear in pain rips me apart. I would do anything, sacrifice anything, to ensure her happiness.” Something flickers in Uncle Leo’s gaze, there and gone too quickly to decipher. He shakes his head slowly.

“I underestimated the power of the mate bond,” he says, almost to himself. “Foolish of me.”

“That makes two of us.” I release my grip and step back, my chest heaving with exertion. A strange smile plays at the corners of Uncle Leo’s mouth, devoid of warmth or humor.

“That’s why I’ll feel less guilty for what I have planned tonight.”

Unease prickles along my spine at his cryptic words. “What are you talking about?”

But even as the question leaves my lips, a searing pain lances through my skull. I stagger back, clutching at my head as the world tilts violently around me. My vision blurs, black spots dancing at the edges. What the hell is happening?

I force my eyes open, fighting against the encroaching darkness. Ava stands before me, her hands weaving in a complex pattern as she chants under her breath. Understanding slams into me with sickening clarity.

She's casting some kind of spell.

I try to lunge for her, to break her concentration, but my legs give out beneath me. I crash to the floor in a graceless heap, taking a chair with me. The pain in my head intensifies, white-hot and blinding.

"I'm sorry, Nickolas. But this is for your own good." Ava's voice seems to come from far away, distorted as if underwater.

Panic claws at my throat as I feel myself slipping away. I can't fall unconscious, not now. Amelia is waiting for me. I need to get to her...

With a last burst of desperate strength, I try to push myself up. But it's no use. My body has become a leaden weight, no longer obeying my commands.

As the darkness rises up to claim me, I hear Ava's final whispered words. "You'll thank us for this later."

No, I scream silently. No, no, no...

And then the abyss swallows me whole, dragging me down into nothingness.

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CHAPTER SIXTY

AMELIA

My fingers tremble uncontrollably on my lap as Nickolas and I sit in the car, the anticipation and dread swirling within me like a storm. After so many days apart, I can barely contain my eagerness to see my parents again.

Nickolas gives my trembling hand a reassuring squeeze. “Everything is going to be alright, I promise.” His words soothe my frayed nerves like a salve, and I tighten my grip, drawing strength from his presence. “I hope so,” I whisper, my voice thick with emotion.

“We are here,” the driver announces, causing my breath to catch in my throat.

Nickolas steps out first, then walks to my side, pulling the door open. I take a deep, steadying breath before accepting his outstretched hand. The crisp autumn air carries the familiar scents of fallen leaves and pine, evoking a comforting nostalgia as my heightened werewolf senses drink in the surroundings.

“Trust me,” Nickolas murmurs, linking our hands together as we walk into the moonlit woods. Our boots crunch over the carpet of leaves, and the cool breeze caresses my skin, temporarily distracting me from the anxious knot in my stomach.

I pull away from my wandering thoughts, glancing around to ensure I haven’t strayed from the path. We’re meeting my father near one of our vacation homes, a place that once held so many cherished memories. As we approach the clearing, I release Nickolas’s hand and slit my wrist, allowing my blood to drip onto the ground and amplify my scent.

The snapping of a twig shatters the peaceful silence, and I spin around, a wide smile spreading across my face in anticipation of my parent’s arrival. But my joy quickly fades as it’s one of Nickolas’s

guards emerging from the shadows.

As I turn back, my name rings out in a voice I recognize instantly, filling the air with a scent that unleashes a torrent of emotions. “Mom, Dad, is that really you?” I rasp, tears of joy blurring my vision as I slowly turn to face them, afraid this moment is just a cruel dream.

“Yes, honey, it’s us. Turn around,” my mother’s sweet, familiar voice beckons.

I swipe away my tears, but more stream down my cheeks the second I lay eyes on them. “Dad, Mom,” I choke out, my voice thick with emotion. I cannot begin to describe the overwhelming sense of relief and joy that washes over me in this moment. They both appear to be well and fully healed, with no visible scars or traces of the terrible condition in which I left them.

“We missed you, dear,” Mom says, opening her arms wide in invitation.

I don’t hesitate a second longer, moving to run toward their embrace, but before I can take a step, a searing pain shoots through me, and I find myself frozen in place as blood spills from my mouth. Panic surges within me as confusion clouds my thoughts, leaving me grasping for understanding.

“Amelia!” My parents’ voices pierce through the haze of my mind, their cries filled with alarm and fear. Reacting instinctively, they shift into their wolf forms, their fur bristling with urgency. But in that moment, I wish desperately that they hadn’t shifted.

I watch helplessly as both of my parents collapse to the ground, whimpering in pain. My mind races with confusion and terror, unable to comprehend the sudden turn of events.

“What the fuck is happening?” I choke out, the taste of blood staining my mouth as panic tightens its grip around my heart. Amidst the chaos, Nickolas’s voice cuts through the turmoil, sharp and commanding.

“Now!” he yells, and in an instant, a shimmering shield materializes around us, encasing us in an impenetrable bubble. I whirl to face him as my legs crumple beneath me, pulling me to the ground. I cough up thick streams of crimson that spill over my lips and chin. “Thank you, Amelia,” Nickolas purrs, his voice dripping with malice as he throws a silver blade to the grass, the metallic tang of blood tainting the air. But it’s not just any blood—it’s mine. A chilling realization sends shivers down my spine.

“Wha-a-t,” I choke out, more blood gurgling up my throat as a fiery ache blossoms my back. The realization hits me like a sledgehammer. I’ve been stabbed in the back, both physically and mentally, the betrayal cutting deep into the core of my being.

Nickolas stalks toward my parents, his eyes glittering with sadistic glee as they revert to their human forms, but it’s too late to stop the dark magic coursing through their veins and sapping their strength. I fight to push myself upright, but my limbs are leaden, and I collapse sideways with a muffled thump, each ragged breath a battle as blood floods my lungs.

I frantically attempt to unmask my scent, hoping to gain some strength from my vampire side, but to no avail. The relentless agony persists, refusing to relent its grip on me. It dawns on me with horrifying clarity—the blade must have been laced with oak tree venom.

“Lord Easterlin and Ember send their regards,” he sneers, wrenching my mother’s head from her shoulders with a sickening crunch of severed vertebrae.

“No!” The scream tears from my raw throat as he flings her decapitated head toward me, her vacant eyes forever frozen in an expression of horror.

“They told me it would be a sight to make you watch me kill them, and they were right.” His lips curve into a cruel smile as he grasps a fistful of my father’s hair, wrenching his head back.

“Please, stop, please,” I beg, my words garbled by the blood pooling around me as life drains from my veins with each feeble beat of my heart.

“So beautiful watching you beg.” With a vicious tug, he tears my father’s head from his shoulders, flinging it carelessly aside to join my mother’s.

An unholy wail of anguish rips from the depths of my soul as I watch their severed heads roll across the grass, their beloved faces twisted in death.

“Now it’s your turn,” Nickolas growls, advancing on me. But the forcefield flickers and dies, and a massive wolf—a mirror image of my father’s beast form—lunges from the shadows, clamping its powerful jaws around Nickolas’s throat.

“Caleb,” I whisper, my vision blurring as the life seeps from my mangled body. I force my gaze to my parents’ severed heads, drinking in their beloved faces one final time before the darkness

closes in. My heart shatters into a million jagged shards, each one slicing through me with the realization that I have brought this upon them. Foolish, naive girl, believing Nickolas's lies and leading my parents to their brutal slaughter. Tears scorch my cheeks as I drown in waves of guilt and grief.

With trembling hands, I pick the bloodied blade that has pierced my heart. Despite Caleb's desperate cries for me to cease, I am consumed by a relentless determination. With a final, decisive motion, I drag the blade across my throat, embracing the blessed oblivion that awaits, welcoming death's cold embrace as the sole release from this unbearable agony.

NICKOLAS

My eyes slowly peel open, but the darkness surrounds me. With a guttural grunt, I push myself to my feet, hands outstretched, grasping at the void, searching for something to anchor me. My fingers graze a cold, rough surface—a wall. I cling to it, using it as a guide, shuffling forward, sniffing the stale air, trying to figure out where the hell I was.

I last remember Ava casting a spell that put me to sleep. Where the fuck have they taken me? My thoughts immediately turn to Amelia, my heart aching at the image of her waiting for me, her heart slowly shattering with each passing moment I don't show. She must think I've changed my mind about meeting her parents. The thought twists like a dagger in my gut. I need to find out where I am and get the hell out.

"Planning on leaving so soon?" a voice slices through the darkness, and the lights blaze to life, searing my eyes. I squeeze them shut, hissing against the onslaught of brightness. "I thought you would like to watch this interesting show with me first." The voice is familiar.

"Callum," I growl, blinking to bring the traitorous snake into focus outside the bars of my cell. What the fuck is going on? Where were Uncle Leo and Ava? Why am I being held prisoner by Callum and not them?

"Nice to see you again, Your Majesty. Or should I say, Nickolas, since we are not in the palace anymore, and I appear to have the upper hand right now?" His smirk is insufferable, and rage boils in my veins.

He smirks, and my jaw clenches. Only Amelia's sweet lips have

the right to utter my given name. No fucking other person! Callum will pay dearly for such disrespect. I stalk toward the bars, gesturing for him to come closer. The second that arrogant face is within reach, I rear back and slam my forehead against his nose. A sickening crunch echoes through the room as blood gushes over his features. “Even as a human, you are no match for me,” I sneer, swiping his blood from my brow. The unmistakable scent of oak tree venom hit me the moment I regained consciousness. I am merely mortal now, stripped of my preternatural strengths; I would have to find a human way to escape this cell without my powers. Callum hisses, clutching his ruined nose.

“One for Nickolas, zero for me.” He shakes his head, seemingly unperturbed by his bleeding nose.

“Release me now, and I might grant you a swift death,” I growl, leaning into the bars, baring my teeth like a caged predator.

“Oh, Nickolas, you don’t seem to understand what’s happening, do you?” His gaze glints with malicious glee, and I remain silent, eyes narrowed as I wait for him to continue his villainous monologue. “Why don’t I show you? I hope we aren’t too late.” Callum beckons a witch forward, and she weaves a spell, projecting a vision that drops me to my knees.

And then, I see her—Amelia. The world tilts on its axis as she appears before me, beautiful and radiant, even in this shadowed projection. But something is wrong, terribly wrong. She lifts a gleaming blade to her throat, and realization cleaves through me like a rusted scythe. No, no, no, this cannot be happening!

I stumble back, legs trembling, and crash to the ground in a boneless heap as she slices that elegant column of flesh. Thick crimson blossoms spilling over her pale skin, and I can’t breathe, can’t think. Tears blur my vision as I watch the life drain from her eyes, those eyes that had so recently gazed upon me with warmth and adoration. My stone-cold heart cracks and rumbles to pieces. “Amelia!” The broken rasp tears from my throat, anguish lancing through me like shards of ice.

“Who knew the king was such a lover boy?” Callum’s mocking words are a mere buzzing in my ears as the projection fades, leaving me bereft, hollowed out. I turn to face him, hatred searing through my veins, scorching my soul. He is the architect of this atrocity, this unforgivable sin. Slowly, I rise, stalking toward the bars once more, my movements liquid and lethal.

“You are a dead man walking,” I vow, glaring at him, willing him to combust from the sheer intensity of my rage.

“I hardly doubt that,” he scoffs, but I detect a tremor of unease in his bravado.

“I am going to break every single one of your one hundred thirty-eight bones,” I begin, relishing the way his throat bobs with a convulsive swallow. “I will cut off your manhood and force it down your gullet. I will pluck out your eyes and peel away each nail before severing your fingers and toes from their sockets. And through it all, I will make sure oak tree venom will be in the room, ensuring you feel every exquisite slice, every agonizing fracture.” His pallor has taken on a grayish cast, eyes wide and glistening with the first inkling of the torment to come. “Once you reach the precipice of death, I will feed you just enough blood to heal, to reset the cycle anew. Again and again, until you beg for the cold embrace of oblivion as a mercy.”

Callum doesn’t utter another word; he merely turns on his heel and flees. Coward. I pivot away from the door, retreating to the farthest corner of my cell. My hands fist in my hair as I crumple to the ground.

Amelia is gone. She’s gone, and it’s all my fault. She chose to stay away from her family to protect them, and now she thinks she’s responsible for their deaths because of me. Callum used dark magic to disguise someone as me, tricking Amelia. For a moment, I even doubted myself, wondering if I truly killed her parents, even though I know I didn’t. I can’t wrap my head around the fact that she took her own life, and the guilt is crushing me. Fuck!” I scream, the weight of my sorrow crashing down upon me. A teardrop rolls down my cheeks. I fucking killed her, and I wasn’t even worthy of being with her, yet I was too selfish to let her go.

“Amelia,” I whisper, my heart heavy with grief. I can’t believe she’s gone before I had the chance to tell her I love her. My heart clenches painfully in my chest. Once I’ve had my revenge, I’ll join her. This world isn’t worth living in without her.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

I step into my office after another grueling day in court. Those old hags seem to have a knack for making my life more stressful than it needs to be. My gaze falls upon Amelia, curled up in the brown armchair by the window, utterly engrossed in a book resting on her lap. The soft golden rays of the setting sun filter through the glass, bathing her in a warm glow that accentuates the gentle curves of her face. She hasn't even noticed my arrival, so lost is she in the words before her.

Curiosity piqued, I quietly pad over and peer over her shoulder to glimpse what has her so enraptured. My eyes widen as I read the first few lines. I didn't know she read such books. So much hard sex, and I can't believe she's reading it with a straight face.

"Amelia!" I call out. She startles, the book tumbling from her hands as she whips around, eyes wide like a deer caught in the lamplight. How endearing she looks, flustered and embarrassed, desperately trying to hide the novel behind her back. Too late, because I'd already seen what she was reading. The corner of my lips curved up into a smirk.

"Nickolas," she swallowed hard, pulling her hair behind her ear. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Clearly," I chuckle, taking a step closer and reveling in her deepening blush. "Who would while reading that much porn?"

"I wasn't reading porn," she defends, clutching the book tighter, looking cute. "It's a love story. They just happen to be... intimate in that scene."

"Right. Intimate." I roll my eyes, moving toward my desk. "Call it whatever you want, little one. Doesn't change the fact that it's

porn."

"It's not!" Her pout only makes her look more adorable. I stare at her, drinking in the indignant flush of her skin, the fire in her eyes. In moments like these, I can hardly believe how far we've come. Months ago, I wouldn't have known she was into dark romance, and now I'm teasing her about the BDSM scene she's reading.

"Amelia." Her name escapes me on a sigh. "Come here."

I extend my hand, and she takes it, allowing me to tug her onto my lap. Cupping her face, I lose myself in the endless blue of her eyes.

"Have I ever told you that you are, without a doubt, the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on?" I brush my thumb over the silken skin of her cheek.

"No," she whispers, color rising under my touch. "You haven't."

"Then let me repeat myself." I tilt her chin up, holding her gaze. "You, Amelia, are the most breathtakingly beautiful woman in existence. And I sure as hell don't deserve you."

"Nickolas..." Tears swim in her eyes and spill over, tracing shimmering paths down her cheeks.

Alarmed, I swipe at them with my thumbs. "Why are you crying, little one?"

"No reason." She sniffles and buries her face against my neck. I wrap my arms around her, savoring her warmth, her scent. My heart swells with a contentment I never dreamed I'd feel.

"I have something to show you," I murmur, kissing her hair before gently setting her on her feet. Hand in hand, we meander through the gardens toward the stables. Amelia tips her face to the sky, basking in the golden late afternoon light. She's radiant, glowing with a joy so pure it steals my breath. I stop walking just to drink her in.

As if sensing my stillness, she turns to me with a smile that outshines the sun. "Isn't it a beautiful day?"

"I suppose." I barely spare the weather a glance, too captivated by the woman before me. She reaches for my hand again, and I gladly lace my fingers with hers. But something's wrong— I can't feel her skin against mine. Frowning, I glance down to see her hand turning transparent in my grasp.

"Amelia?" I blink hard, and in that fraction of a second, she vanishes. "Amelia!"

Panic rising in my throat, I spin in a circle, scanning the gardens.

But she's nowhere to be seen. I tear through the castle, shouting her name, my heart threatening to beat out of my chest. At last, I burst into our room, and there she is, facing away from me.

"There you are!" I reach out to grab her shoulder. "How did you get up here so—"

The words die on my tongue as she turns to face me. Blood. It's everywhere, soaking her gown, dripping from the vicious slash across her throat. Her once vibrant blue eyes are dull, accusing, as tears of crimson streak down her ashen face.

"I trusted you, Nickolas." Her voice is a ragged whisper. "And you betrayed me."

"No!" I stumble back, hands raised. "Amelia, I swear, I didn't." I tell her, wishing she would believe me.

"Betrayed me!" she shrieks, lurching toward me, bloodstained fingers curled into claws. The word echoes off the stone walls, reverberating inside my skull. I squeeze my eyes shut, bracing for her vengeance. I deserve it. I deserve so much worse.

But the blow never comes. Instead, another voice intrudes. Distant, muffled, but familiar. "Nickolas! Wake up, boy!"

Uncle Leo. Why does he sound so far away? And what does he mean, wake up? I am awake. I—

"Nickolas!"

With a strangled gasp, I bolt upright.

" Uncle Leo," I say in disbelief as his face swims into focus inside my cell, the heavy iron door swinging open behind him. He must have broken it open while I slept.

"Come, we must hurry," he urges, his calloused hand gripping mine like a vice as he pulls me out into the dank, oppressive hallway. We race down the corridor until he skids to a halt before another cell.

"Lord Easterlin," I growl, my heart pounding with hatred for the man who took Amelia from me. But Leo shakes his head grimly.

"Unfortunately, still alive. Now isn't the time to kill him," Uncle Leo grunts, glancing at the angry red needle mark on my arm as he fumbles with a key.

I open my mouth to argue when the coppery stench of blood mixed with a hauntingly familiar scent assaults my senses. Even weakened by oak tree venom, I'd know that scent anywhere. "Aunt Ava!" I cry, pressing against the bars, straining to see into the inky darkness.

“Nick…” Her normally vibrant voice is little more than a thready whisper. Uncle Leo wrenches the door open and rushes inside, me on his heels. I freeze, my heart seizing at the sight of Aunt Ava—the fiercest witch I know— broken and bloody, clinging to her mate with rapidly waning strength.

“I’m here, my love. Everything will be alright,” Uncle Leo soothes, gathering her into his arms and pressing a tender kiss to her ashen brow. Searing pain lances through my chest as I’m hit with the brutal realization that I’ll never hold Amelia like that again. Never shower her with the love she deserved. I stare at my trembling hands, anguish and rage warring inside me as I picture the monster responsible for stealing my heart. I need to find that asshole and tear him apart with my bare hands. “Nickolas!” Uncle Leo’s sharp voice yanks me back to the present. “Now isn’t the time. I promise he will pay.”

I want to object, to demand we hunt Easterlin down immediately. But one look at Ava’s limp form cradled against his chest, and the objection dies on my tongue. I have already lost my heart’s treasure. I cannot delay getting my aunt to a healer out of blind vengeance, no matter how much it burns in my veins.

“Let’s go,” I mutter, following Uncle Leo out of the cell.

“To Eric now.” Uncle Leo’s words stop me cold.

“What the fuck happened while I was out?” I demand, brow furrowed in confusion.

“I’d love to explain, but now isn’t the time.” He forges ahead, stopping five cells down and fitting a key into the lock with shaking hands. Inside, Eric is huddled against the wall, broken and bloodied like Ava.

“My King,” he croaks, a ghost of a smile on his split lips as I haul him upright, draping his arm across my shoulders.

“I’ll make them pay for this, my friend,” I vow, my voice cracking under the weight of my fury and sorrow.

“I know you will.” His hand flutters weakly against my chest. I swallow hard against the lump in my throat. I hate seeing him reduced to this, but revenge will have to wait.

“Hurry, Nickolas! They’re coming!” Uncle Leo shouts. The thunder of approaching footsteps fills the hall. I hoist Eric onto my back and bolt for the exit.

“Which way?” I pant as we burst out of the cell block.

“Follow me.” Uncle Leo takes off down the opposite corridor;

Ava clutched tightly to his chest. “Get down!” he bellows. I drop to a crouch just as an arrow hisses past, oak tree venom glistening on its wicked tip. He must have heard the twang of the bowstring as the arrow was released.

We race through the twisting labyrinth of tunnels until we finally break free, emerging into a dense forest bathed in cold moonlight. That’s not good. It’s just going to make it easier for them to catch us. I lower Eric to the ground, gulping lungfuls of crisp night air. Fuck, is this what it’s like to be human? So fragile, so weak?

“We need to keep moving, Nick,” Uncle Leo pants, shifting Ava in his arms.

I nod, hoisting Eric onto my back once more, ignoring the scream of my muscles. We plunge into the trees, brambles tearing at our skin as we flee our pursuers. The damp earth muffles our pounding footsteps, but I can feel the vibrations of our enemies drawing ever closer.

My body is on fire, every nerve shrieking as the oak venom sears through my veins. But I don’t dare slow down. I can’t lose Eric, too. Not like I lost her...

“Duck!” Uncle Leo roars. I drop into a crouch just as an arrow hisses past my ear, close enough to ruffle my hair. I don’t look back; I can’t. I just run.

We run until the pounding of feet fades and the earth stops shuddering. At last, we stumble into a hidden cave, hastily smearing mud over the entrance to mask our scent. Collapsing against the clammy wall, I strain my ears, listening for any sign of pursuit. Silence. For now.

Questions burn on my tongue, but as I turn to Uncle Leo, he lurches to his feet. “Where are you going?” I rasp, catching his sleeve.

“They need warmth. Water. I’m going to find firewood.” He tries to pull away, but I tighten my grip.

“I’m coming with you.”

“No, you’re not.” He wrenches free of my grasp.

“I wasn’t asking.” I push to my feet, swaying slightly as the cave tilts around me.

“The venom is still in your system, Nickolas. We can’t risk it.” He plants himself firmly in my path, unmovable as a mountain. I suck in a shuddering breath, struggling for calm.

“We can waste time arguing while they fight for their lives, or we

can work together to ensure they see the dawn."

"Stay behind me," he grits out, shoulders sagging in defeat. He turns and stalks out of the cave. I shake my head in disbelief. He forgets I'm not just his nephew anymore. I'm a king.

We search the woods for kindling and water, senses straining for any hint of danger. The gurgle of a stream leads us to a small lake. Gently, we carry Ava and Eric to the water's edge, trickling drops into their parched mouths, washing away the blood crusted on their skin.

"The bastard double-crossed us." I still, fingers tightening on Eric's shoulder.

"What do you mean, double-crossed? What did you do?" Uncle Leo looks away, jaw working.

"We made a deal with him. Joined forces. But he betrayed us." White-hot rage explodes in my chest. I surge to my feet, dumping Eric unceremoniously on the ground. "You did what?!" Uncle Leo catches him before he can hit the rocks, lowering him down carefully before rising to face me.

"I had no choice, Nickolas."

"No choice? Are you fucking kidding me?" I snarl, stepping into his space, my face inches from his.

"Tell me right now, would you have killed Nathaniel tonight?" he demands, his voice laced with urgency and accusation.

"So that's why you're partnering with the enemy."

"You didn't answer my question, Nickolas. Would you have ripped out Nathaniel's heart from his body and smiled down at his lifeless eyes tonight if you met him?" he presses, moving closer to me, locking eyes with me in a fierce stare. I remain silent, knowing my answer won't sit well with him. "That's what I thought," he says coldly. "I did what I had to do."

"And look what it fucking cost us!" I roar, flinging my arm toward Ava and Eric's broken bodies.

"You think I don't know that?" he shouts, anguish cracking his voice. "Ava is my mate, my heart. I almost lost her because of my blind need for vengeance. I know exactly how badly I fucked up!" I deflate, scrubbing a hand over my face.

"What about Eric? How did he end up in this mess?"

"He was at the house when Easterlin attacked. Looking for you." I close my eyes, guilt rising like bile in my throat. Of course. They must have lowered the wards for their new "ally," not knowing he'd

stab them in the back. “I know it didn’t go as planned, but this is for the best,” Uncle Leo says, gripping my shoulder. I jerk away, fury sparking through me again.

“For the best? Amelia is dead, Leo! Dead! Because of your brilliant fucking plan, and you have the nerve to say it’s for the best?” Tears burn my eyes, grief and rage a living thing inside me.

“She didn’t deserve you, Nickolas.” Uncle Leo’s words hit me like a punch to the gut.

“No,” I snarl, getting right in his face, “I didn’t deserve her.” Uncle Leo opens his mouth to retort, but suddenly, he wrenches me around, shielding me with his body. I watch in horror as an arrow sprouts from his back. Then another. And another.

“No!” I scream, blood splattering my face as it gushes from his mouth. No, no, no, not him too, please... I blink, and three more arrows slam home. I can’t breathe. I try to push him away, to take the arrows myself, but he won’t budge, his body jerking as the shafts punch through his flesh, one after another.

“Do it now,” Uncle Leo grits out, his face ashen.

“Fucking move!” I howl, but my legs won’t obey. I look down and see my feet sinking into the earth, black ropes of magic snaking up my calves. Panicked, I strain against the bonds, ancient words slithering past my ears in a language I don’t know. What the fuck is happening?

“Go!” Uncle Leo groans, shoving me with the last of his strength. I stumble backward into the portal, my cry of protest snatched away by the vortex.

As I tumble through the in-between space, I catch a glimpse of Ava on her knees, blood trickling from her nose as she holds the portal open with sheer force of will.

“I love you,” Uncle Leo mouths to Ava, his eyes shining with unshed tears as he sinks to his knees, blood pooling around him.

“I love you too,” she whispers back, just before his eyes slide shut, and he crumples to the ground.

“NO!” I scream, but the portal is already starting to fray, the magic flickering as Ava’s strength gutters out. I should have been flung out the other side by now, but the vortex is collapsing in slow motion, seconds stretching into eons.

Through the disintegrating gateway, I see Lord Easterlin triumph, twisting his face into a skull’s grin as he urges his men onward, arrows flying in a black cloud.

Ava lurches around, a shaft blooming from her shoulder. “We love you,” she mouths, tears cutting through the blood and ash on her cheeks. With the last of her power, she hurls Eric’s limp form through the portal and seals it shut behind him, severing the last link to everything I’ve ever known.

I land hard on the other side, shock, and grief crashing over me in relentless waves. For a long moment, I just stand there, staring up at nothing. I don’t move. I don’t blink. I don’t even fucking breathe.

This can’t be real. It can’t fucking be.

And then, sharp and sudden, I feel it. A searing pain in my chest. I look down to see an arrow protruding from my heart, its shaft slick with my own blood and black with oak venom. A laugh bubbles up my throat, crazed and broken. I let my head fall back, howling my mirth at the uncaring stars as tears stream down my face. I laugh until I can’t anymore, until the poison in my blood turns each breath to molten agony.

My shirt is soaked with blood, the fabric squelching obscenely as I struggle to stand. I know my heart is stuttering in my chest, the beats irregular and shallow, but I feel no pain.

There is no pain left to feel.

My knees give out and I slump back down, limbs gone leaden and cold. Through dimming vision, I see Eric lying a few feet away, his chest barely rising.

As the darkness rushes up to claim me, one final thought flickers through my mind, faint and fading.

Even if I die tonight, even if it all ends here…I know my death will be avenged.

I will be avenged.

With a last rattling sigh, I let my eyes fall shut and welcome the void, a smile on my bloodstained lips.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

AMELIA

My eyes shoot open as I bolt upright, gasping for air. My heart pounds against my ribs, confusion, and panic swirling through me. Where am I? How am I alive?

Before I can take in my surroundings, the door bursts open. "Amelia," a familiar voice breathes, and tears spring to my eyes. Caleb rushes to my side, and I throw my arms open, desperate to feel him, to know this is real.

"I've missed you, sis," he whispers into my hair as he crushes me to his chest. I can only sob in reply, my whole body shaking with the force of my emotions.

"I've missed you too," I manage after a long moment, my fingers digging into his back, anchoring myself to him. His scent fills my nose like the sweetest perfume. Even if this is a dream, it's the most beautiful one I could imagine. Another figure appears in the doorway.

"You're awake," Alissa cries, hurrying over to enfold me in her embrace.

"Yes, surprisingly," I chuckle wetly, a thousand questions burning on my tongue. But for now, I just want to bask in their presence, in the miracle of holding them again.

"Amelia!" Lily's shriek precedes her as she barrels into the room. Caleb must have mind-linked the others because soon, my family is pouring in, surrounding me with their love and tears. I even meet Caleb and Alissa's daughter, a tiny, perfect bundle of joy. Lily's parents and her siblings too. I cry until I'm hollow, overwhelmed by the impossibility of it all.

Just when I think I can't take any more, two more figures limp into the room. I freeze, my heart stuttering in my chest.

"Hello, princess," Dad rasps, leaning heavily on his cane. Fresh tears blur my vision as I shake my head in disbelief.

"Stop crying, honey," Mom soothes, making her way slowly to my side, Dad shuffling along behind her.

"You're alive," I choke out, the words mangled by my hitching breaths.

"Yes, baby girl." Mom cups my face in her hands, and my eyes flutter shut at the achingly familiar touch. I want to deny it, to protect myself from waking to a world where they're gone. But I would know the feel of my mother's skin anywhere, even in death.

I pull her close, burying my face in her neck. Another hand, large and calloused, comes to rest on my back. Dad. A broken sound escapes me as I reach out blindly, dragging him into our embrace.

"How?" I ask when I can finally bear to let them go. I scoot back on the bed, tugging them down to sit with me. I need to understand to make sense of the impossible.

Caleb exchanges a loaded glance with Alissa, and suddenly, a shimmering shield springs up around the room. Whatever he's about to say, he doesn't want it overheard. "It's actually quite simple," he begins, his tone carefully neutral. "Alissa used your blood and Mom's to revive you guys. She arrived on the scene and acted on instinct, harnessing black magic to bring you guys back. It was easier since you were all lying in each other's blood."

"I know we'll all die someday," Alissa says softly, "but I couldn't let that be your guys' day. Not like that."

"Thank you," Mom breathes, reaching out to squeeze Alissa's hand. Dad and I echo her, gratitude thick in our voices.

But even as relief washes through me, a shard of ice lodges in my heart. I remember that day with brutal clarity, remember the role I played in our destruction. "I'm sorry," I whisper, my head dropping under the weight of my shame.

"It's not your fault, honey." Mom tips my chin up, forcing me to meet her eyes.

"But it is." Self-loathing curdles in my gut as I recall my choices, my blindness.

"No, it's not," Caleb says fiercely. "The only one to blame is that bastard, not you."

At the mention of Nickolas, the ice in my heart spreads, jagged

and cold. He's gone. I should be glad, should rejoice that my family's murderer has faced justice. But I can't. Despite everything, despite the unforgivable betrayal, I loved him.

I fell in love with him, and he played me for a fool. The pain of it crashes over me anew, stealing my breath. How could I have been so naive, so stupid? To think he could have truly cared for me...

It's a lesson I won't soon forget, carved into my very bones. Never again will I let myself be so deceived, so vulnerable.

Never again.

•••

I wipe the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand, my muscles still burning from the intense training session with Caleb. The memory of what happened last time is seared into my mind, a constant reminder of how much training I still need and how far I have to push myself. It’s a welcome distraction from thoughts of *him*, the one person I can’t bear to dwell on.

It’s been a month since we returned home, a month since his death freed my family from hiding. We’ve thrown ourselves into rebuilding our nation, a daunting task that feels like trying to hold back the tide with our bare hands.

I step into my room and freeze at the sight of Lily pacing the floor, her face pinched with worry. My heart lurches as I rush to her side, my hand instinctively going to her swollen belly. She’s so close to her due date, and the thought of something being wrong with the baby sends icy tendrils of fear down my spine.

“She’s fine, don’t worry,” Lily assures me, a strained smile on her lips. I guide her to the bed, urging her to sit.

“But something else is wrong?” Lily takes a shaky breath.

“Yes, unfortunately. I know this is the last thing you want to hear, but I think something’s happened to Eric.” I blink, caught off guard.

“Oh.”

“I know you probably don’t want to hear about the vampire kingdom after everything with Nickolas. But Eric is my mate, Amelia. I’m scared for him.” I close my eyes, sucking a breath at the mention of that place, that name.

“Why do you think something’s wrong?” I ask, pulling my eyes open. Nickolas’s betrayal was his own; I can’t let it taint my view of Eric, not when he means so much to Lily. She twists her hands in

her lap.

“There’s something that happened the day of the meeting that you don’t know about. The night Nickolas planned to meet Uncle Nathaniel before he came back from Uncle Leo’s, Eric went looking for him because he was running late. And while he was there, he called me.” I lean forward, my brow furrowing.

“What did he say?”

“He told me to leave, go to my parents, and not return to the vampire kingdom no matter what. He said to wait for him to come for me.” Her voice cracks. “It’s been a month, Amelia. I haven’t heard a word.” Shock ripples through me.

“Why am I just now hearing about this?” I demand, a flare of anger sparking in my chest. Lily flinches.

“You’d just woken up. The last thing you needed was to worry that something awful might have happened to my mate. And I kept hoping he’d just…show up.” I deflate, the fight going out of me.

“I get it. But still, you should have told me.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Was that the last time you heard from him? Have you felt anything through your bond?” Marked mates can sense when the other dies the sudden severing of that vital connection.

“I can still feel him, but it’s muted somehow. Not enough. Amelia, I need you to help me find him. Please.”

And there it is, the real reason she’s here. I can’t blame her for turning to me; anyone else in the family would probably tell her to forget Eric and move on. But he was my friend too.

Even if a small, bitter part of me whispers that he had to have known what Nickolas was planning, that he played me for a fool just like his best friend did. I shove those thoughts away. Lily swears he was in the dark, and I have to believe her. I have to believe in him.

I meet her pleading gaze, my heart heavy. Going back there, back to the place that haunts my nightmares…it feels like willingly walking into the lion’s den. But I can’t abandon her, can’t leave Eric to an unknown fate.

“Okay,” I say at last. “I’ll go look for him. Hopefully, everything’s alright, and this was all just a misunderstanding.” Lily throws her arms around me, nearly crushing me in her embrace.

“Thank you, Amelia. Thank you so much.”

I return the hug woodenly, my mind already racing ahead. I’ll

have to lie to my family to come up with some excuse for why I need to return to the vampire kingdom. Even with Nickolas gone, even without a king on the throne, it's still one of the most dangerous places in the world for our kind. But I'll do it—for Lily, for Eric, and for myself.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

The night stretches endlessly before me, every minute an eternity of restless tossing and turning. No matter how I try, I can't escape the thoughts that plague me, the memories that claw at my mind with razor-sharp talons.

Him. It always comes back to him.

His scent, rich and earthy, surrounded me. The warmth of his lips trailing over my skin, raising gooseflesh in their wake. The iron bands of his arms pulling me flush against the hard planes of his body. The way his brow furrowed in that adorable frown whenever I tried to defend my books.

The rugged beauty of his face that still haunts my dreams.

With a strangled cry, I fling off the sweat-damp sheets and stumble outside, desperate for air, for space. I break into a run, pushing my body until my lungs burn and my muscles scream in protest. But it's not enough. Nothing is enough to outrun the ache in my soul.

A ragged scream tears from my throat as I throw my head back to the uncaring stars. "Why can't I stop thinking about him? Why?" I demand, tears streaming down my face. "Isn't it enough that after everything, after fucking everything, I still love him? Can't you just let me forget? Please?"

But there's no answer, no relief from the relentless ache in my chest. I close my eyes, dragging my hands over my face. I need to forget him. I have to.

In a last, desperate bid for peace, I shed my clothes and shift, letting my wolf take over. Maybe if I run far enough, fast enough, I can finally exhaust myself to the point where even my dreams can't

touch me.

I run until the sun kisses the horizon, and my legs tremble and threaten to give out. Marie begs me to stop, to rest, but I ignore her, pushing past the pain, past the fatigue.

It's nearly dawn when I finally drag myself back to the castle, stumbling through the front door on shaking legs. I barely manage a quick shower before collapsing into bed, praying for just a few hours of oblivion.

But it feels like mere minutes have passed when a knock at the door startles me awake. The omegas have come to fetch me for breakfast, and I know I can't refuse.

I force myself through the motions of getting ready, my body leaden and aching. When I finally make it downstairs to join my family, I'm starting to regret not just staying in bed.

"Amelia!" Mom gasps, her fork clattering against her plate. "Why do you look..."

"Like shit," Caleb finishes bluntly, and I shoot him a baleful glare.

"Had trouble sleeping," I mutter, dropping into my seat. I reach for a piece of bread, but it turns to ash on my tongue. I let it fall back onto my plate, my appetite vanishing. Mom's face creases with concern.

"I'm sorry, dear. Do you need the doctor to give you something to help you sleep? You've been having trouble for a while now."

I nod wearily. "I guess I do." This past month has been a battle for every moment of rest, but last night was the worst it's ever been. Probably because I wish to go back to where it all began.

"I'll have it sent up to your room later," Mom promises, and I manage a grateful smile.

Silence descends, broken only by the clink of cutlery and the occasional murmur of conversation. I take a deep breath, steeling myself. It's now or never.

"I need to go to vampire territory," I announce, and the room goes deathly still. I plow ahead before anyone can protest. "Lily's mate, Eric, is missing. I have to help her find him." Dad frowns.

"Since when are you a tracker?"

"I'm not, but I have to go. I need to..." My throat closes up, the words sticking in my chest. I need closure, need to stand in the place where I gave my heart to a man who destroyed me. But I can't say it, can't give voice to that shameful truth. A warm hand covers mine, and I look up to meet Mom's understanding gaze.

"He's the reason you can't sleep, isn't he?" she asks softly, and I nod, blinking back tears. "You want to go so you can find some closure." It's not a question, but I nod anyway, my heart in my throat. Caleb scoffs.

"Can't you get fucking closure here?"

"Language," Mom scolds, shooting a pointed look at his daughter.

"Sorry, but when my sister is spouting bullshit after not sleeping a wink last night, it's hard to keep a clean mouth," he grumbles.

Mom's eyes flash. "She's not talking bullshit, Caleb. She loved him. He was her mate." I freeze, shock rippling through me. I never told anyone how I felt about Nickolas, not even Lily. The shame of loving the man who tore our family apart, who killed our parents...it was too much to bear. But somehow, Mom knows. She sees me.

Caleb turns to me, disbelief etched into every line of his face. "You loved him?"

I drop my gaze, my stomach churning with humiliation and self-loathing. He must think I'm a traitor, a disgrace to our family and our kind.

"Don't you dare look at her like that," Mom snaps, her grip tightening on my hand. "We were lucky to find our mates within our own people. We can't possibly understand what your sister is going through. Stop making her feel worse!" Tears sting my eyes at her fierce defense, at the depth of her understanding. I never realized how much she saw, how much she knew. I squeeze her hand, trying to pour all my gratitude into that one small gesture. Caleb ducks his head, chastened.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's okay," I manage, my voice thick. "Besides, the vampire kingdom is without a king right now. I doubt it'll be as risky as it was before." Dad's brow furrows.

"It's still not safe for you to travel there alone, dear."

"I'll go with her," Caleb says abruptly, and I whip around to stare at him, shocked.

"You will?" He nods, his jaw tight.

"Yeah. That way, I can make sure you come back in one piece."

"Thank you." I turn back to Dad, hope flaring in my chest. "So, what do you say?" [He sighs heavily, exchanging a long look with Mom. Some silent communication passes between them before he nods, reluctance in every line of his body.

"Alright. You can go. But please, come back safe."

"I will. I promise." I lean over to press a kiss to his cheek, relief and gratitude welling up inside me. I wasn't expecting them to agree so readily, and I could hardly believe my luck.

As I settle back into my chair, I let out a shaky breath. I'm really doing this. I'm going back to the place where it all began, where Nickolas and I...

I shake my head, cutting off that dangerous train of thought. I can't help but wonder what's changed since his death, who the lords will choose as their new king, and how Beatrice is faring.

So many questions, so many unknowns. But one thing is sure—I will get the answers I seek. One way or another, I will find the closure I so desperately need.

Even if it destroys me in the process.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

The morning sun peeks over the horizon, its golden rays filtering through the castle windows as we prepare to depart. Three sleek vehicles are lined up in the courtyard: the first carrying a team of expert trackers and seasoned warriors, the third filled with more skilled fighters to serve as our guards. Caleb and I will ride in the second car, sandwiched securely between our protective details.

I didn't see the need to waste any more time, so I made the decision for us to travel the next day. Lily and I had already pored over every possible meaning behind Eric's abrupt silence last night. The only conclusion we could draw was that he must have found himself in grave danger, though from what threat, we couldn't begin to guess.

A knot of dread forms in my gut at the thought of hunters being involved. Those sadistic bastards may slink in the shadows these days after my father brought their former leader to his knees years ago. But they're still out there, and if they so much as laid a finger on Eric...I shudder, pushing the thought away as my mother approaches.

"Do you really have to go?" she asks once more, fretting as only a mother can. I can see the worry etched in the creases around her eyes and the thinning of her lips, despite her earlier reassurances that she understands why this trip is necessary.

"Yes, Mom, you know why," I reply as gently as I can. We've been through this already; I'm not just going to find Eric but to find...closure. The vampire kingdom is where I fell hard for Nickolas, where I had my heart shattered into shards. I need to breathe in the ashes of what could have been one final time before I

box up those memories forever.

"But you're not feeling well," she protests, reaching up to tuck an errant strand of hair behind my ear. Her fingers are cool against my flushed skin as she studies me, maternal concern writ large on her features. I try to muster a reassuring smile, but it feels brittle on my lips.

"It's just a little trouble sleeping, Mom. That doesn't mean I'm ill. Besides, I have my medication." She opens her mouth to argue, but Caleb steps forward, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"I promise to keep her safe, Mom. I won't let anything happen to her."

She searches his face for a long moment before expelling a soft sigh of resignation. Pulling us both into a fierce embrace, she murmurs, "I love you." When we finally pull apart, I turn to Dad, my eyes stinging with tears I refuse to let fall.

"Keep her safe," I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper. He takes my hand, his calloused palm warm and reassuring against my skin.

"Always," he vows, giving my fingers a gentle squeeze.

With a last wave to our family, Caleb and I climb into the car. He guides us through the castle gates, and we're off, hurtling down the winding roads that will eventually lead us back to that place, to the ghosts waiting there. The two other vehicles fall into line ahead and behind us, our protective escort.

The gentle hum of the engine soon lulls me into a fitful doze as we eat up the miles. I rouse only when we pause for restroom breaks, my head pounding, mouth dry as cotton. Exhaustion drags at my limbs, turning them leaden and sluggish. I tell myself it's just the toll of a restless night, the aftermath of pushing my body too hard in a vain attempt to outrun my own thoughts.

But a small, niggling voice in the back of my mind whispers that it could be something more, that Mom's fears may not be so unfounded after all. Determinedly, I shove the thought away. I can't afford to be sick, not now. Not when Eric needs me. Not when my own heart needs this chance for closure.

So I let the miles roll away beneath the tires, carrying me ever closer to the vampire kingdom and the answers that await me there, no matter how much I may dread what I will find.

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“I’m fine,” I lie through gritted teeth, swallowing hard against the nausea rising in my throat. Caleb insists we should turn back, citing my recent bout of vomiting this morning as cause for concern. His eyes narrow as he argues.

“No, you’re not. You slept the entire journey, and now you’re vomiting.”

Before I can protest further, my stomach lurches violently. I spin around just in time, retching up the meager remains of my breakfast onto the forest floor. Bile burns my throat as I gasp for air, my face flushed and clammy.

Caleb’s jaw tightens with resolve. “That’s it. I’m not taking any more of your stubborn protests. We’re heading back.” He strides toward the camp, his boots crunching on the fallen leaves. We moved from the camp toward a nearby stream, where I could rinse my face and mouth.

“I’m okay!” I call out weakly, hurrying after him on shaky legs. We’ve come too far for me to turn back now without even a glimpse of the city. I can’t face Lily’s disappointment.

As Caleb’s pace quickens, I decide on a shortcut through the towering trees, hoping to cut him off. The dappled shadows seem to shift around me, and an eerie feeling settles in the pit of my stomach. I wrap my arms tightly around myself, the hairs on my neck standing on end.

“Caleb!” I call, my voice trembling with panic. How could I have lost sight of him so quickly? The rustle of bushes behind me causes my heart to hammer wildly in my chest. I whirl around, claws extended. “Who’s there?” I demand, trying to mask my fear with bravado.

“Amelia...” A familiar voice breathes my name, and a skeletal hand drops onto my shoulder, bony fingers gripping me.

I nearly strike out before the scent registers—sour and sickly but unmistakably Beatrice. My eyes widen in shock as I turn to face her, recoiling at her emaciated form. Sunken eyes, brimming with tears, study me imploringly as she pulls me into a frail embrace. I stiffen, too stunned to return the gesture.

“What happened?” I whisper, gently extricating myself from her grip to get a better look at her. A haunted look crosses her gaunt features.

“I don’t even know where to start...”

“Anywhere is fine,” I murmur, still staring at her skeletal frame

in utter disbelief.

“I think it’s better I show you,” she rasps, her bony fingers curling around my wrist with surprising strength, pulling me deeper into the forest.

“Show me?” I echo uncertainly even as my feet follow her lead. Suddenly, I dig my heels in, realizing Caleb will be frantic. “Wait, I can’t just disappear. My brother will be worried sick. Let me bring him and the others first.” A flicker of hesitation crosses Beatrice’s sunken eyes before she gives a jerky nod.

“No problem.”

It takes all my persuasive powers to convince the distrustful Caleb to allow me to follow Beatrice, his jaw locked in a tense line. He finally relents, but not before insisting half our entourage accompanies us as protection.

Beatrice leads us on a winding path through the gnarled trees until we reach a cave mouth, the entrance to a dank underground passage. As we emerge on the other side, I’m struck by a scene of utter desolation that steals the breath from my lungs.

Thousands of vampires, little more than walking corpses, litter the forest floor, their dull eyes reflecting a haunting mix of hope and resignation. A collective gasp rises from our group at the sight of their sunken cheeks, protruding bones, and cracked lips.

“Our queen is here to save us,” a raspy voice cries out, and in an instant, every haunted face turns toward me with desperate longing.

I freeze in place, my heart pounding as a young vampire boy, his ribs alarmingly visible beneath his tattered shirt rushes forward to clutch at my legs. “Please save us, our queen,” he pleads in a reedy voice.

“Please, save us,” another vampire pleads, dropping to her knees along with others.

Pleas and desperate cries rise all around me as I stand rooted to the spot, my mind whirling as I try to make sense of this unfolding scene. What in the hell is happening here?

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CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

“Please stand up. I am not—” I begin, but Beatrice clamps her hand over mine, silencing me midsentence. I turn to face her, brows furrowed in confusion as she shakes her head urgently.

“They need it,” she rasps, desperation etched in the hollows of her cheeks.

“Need what?”

“Hope.”

Understanding dawns as I glance around at the sea of haunted faces turned toward me with longing. “They think I’m Jane right now, don’t they? That’s why they called me their queen.” I bear an uncanny resemblance to her, and in their malnourished state, they can barely detect my werewolf scent. Their supernatural senses are dulled. Beatrice gives a jerky nod.

“After everything they’ve been through, they need that hope to cling to.”

My gaze rakes over their emaciated forms—the protruding bones, cracked lips, and dull eyes reflecting a haunting mix of resignation and desperate longing. What unspeakable horrors led them to this state?

“What happened here, Beatrice?”

She swallows hard before beginning to recount the harrowing ordeal of the past month in a ragged voice. I listen in stunned silence as the horrific details unspool—Lord Easterlin’s bloody coup, his ruthless purge of any who refused to join his army, and the beheadings of those who defied him. He also killed Nickolas’s Uncle, Ava, and Eric.

My heart clenches at the mention of Eric’s name among the

casualties. But it's the final revelation that leaves me reeling. Lord Easterlin claiming to have killed Nickolas himself, presenting his severed head to the council as proof.

"But...that can't be," I sputter, my mind whirling. "Caleb already killed him. How could Easterlin..." My voice trails off as I struggle to make sense of the inconsistencies. Beatrice can only shake her head helplessly.

"I don't know the details. I only know Easterlin displayed his head."

My best guess is that the treacherous lord somehow obtained Nickolas's remains from wherever Caleb left them and took credit for the kill. But how could he have known where to look in the first place? The nagging feeling that I'm missing a crucial piece of the puzzle refuses to dissipate.

"Amelia?" Caleb's gruff voice breaks into my troubled thoughts. "What are you going to do?" I tear my gaze from Beatrice's haunted eyes to survey our ragtag band of ten werewolves surrounded by legions of starving vampires. We may be sworn enemies, but they are in no condition to feed themselves, not with the wasted frames of nursing mothers and children among them.

"How many men do we have with us here?" I ask, turning to Caleb.

"Ten." I draw a fortifying breath.

"I know werewolves and vampires are not the best of friends, but right now, we can't let that divide us. There are breastfeeding mothers and children here who need our help." I catch Beatrice's eye, my expression resolute. "I suggest you send half the men to hunt for animals and bring the fresh blood back for them to feed. What do you think?"

A muscle ticks in Caleb's jaw, but he gives a curt nod. "Anything for the queen of vampires," he bites out, a mocking lilt to his tone. I ignore the jibe, offering him a grateful look as he turns to rapidly disperse his orders among the men. Within moments, they stream off into the forest.

"I knew you would help us," Beatrice whispers, tears shining in her eyes as she grips my arm. I can scarcely recognize the woman before me, so diminished from the proud, self-assured witch I met months ago. The trauma she has endured is written in every hollowed plane of her face.

"I blame my good heart," I murmur, brushing away the

dampness on her cheek with my thumb. Her watery gaze holds mine intently.

“You know he loved you, right?” The breath catches in my throat at the oblique reference to Nickolas. I shake my head mutely, grief and betrayal welling up anew.

“Unfortunately, you’re wrong,” I rasp, taking her hand and leading her toward a fallen log to sit.

“But he did, dear,” she insists, desperation tingeing her voice. “He loved you more than you can imagine.” Tears prick my eyes as I remember Nickolas’s deception with visceral clarity.

“I wish, Beatrice. I really wish he did.”

She falls silent after that, and I’m grateful, realizing she must have picked up on my reluctance to discuss him. He’s the last person I want to think about right now.

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A wave of nausea hits me without warning, and I double over, retching violently into the nearby bushes. Bile burns my throat as I expel last night's dinner, my body wracked with dry heaves. Gasping for air, I wipe my mouth with the back of my trembling hand, bewildered. I haven't eaten anything out of the ordinary, so what could be causing this?

Caleb's raised voice cuts through my muddled thoughts, and I quickly make my way toward the commotion. As I round the corner of the tents, the scene that greets me is one of escalating hostility.

"I shouldn't have expected anything less from the likes of you. Spat!" Caleb spits vehemently at the feet of an unfamiliar woman, his face contorted with disgust.

"Caleb!" I call out, hurrying to his side and murmuring under my breath. "What's going on?" His jaw tightens as he turns to me, fury simmering in his eyes.

"This fucking ingrate is accusing us of poisoning the animals we hunted to feed them. She's howling at me to tell her which poison so she can find the antidote."

I'm not surprised by the accusation, it's only natural they would suspect us of treachery given our long-standing enmity. Still, after the efforts Caleb's men made last night to provide sustenance, I can understand his vexation at being repaid with such hostility.

"Let me talk to her," I say, turning toward the woman. But before I can get a word out, she cuts me off with blistering scorn.

"Don't think because we called you queen yesterday, you are for a second," she sneers, her dark eyes flashing with disdain as she rakes her gaze over me in contempt. "You may be the late king's mate, but that means nothing now that he's gone." Keeping my tone measured, I offer her a placating smile.

"I know it was due to the lack of blood. Don't worry." Her lips curl back over her teeth in a feral snarl.

"If you knew, then why the hell did you feed us? Unless you didn't take it as us accepting you as our queen? In which case, I'm fucking right to believe you people poisoned us!"

"No, we fed you because we can't just stand by and watch helpless people suffering without doing anything," I insist, struggling to keep my voice calm and reasonable.

"Helpless?" She practically spits the word, clearly affronted. "Who says we're helpless?"

"I didn't mean it like that." I backpedal quickly, holding up my palms in a placating gesture. "What I'm trying to say is..."

"I don't fucking care. Tell me what poison before I rip her to shred," she snarls, cutting me off again. A rustling in the bushes behind her draws my gaze, and my eyes widen in horror as a group of vampires emerges, one of them holding Beatrice with a wicked-looking knife pressed to her throat.

"What the hell are you doing?" I cry out, instinctively taking a step forward. "Let her go!" The vampire digs the blade deeper, drawing a thin line of crimson that trickles down Beatrice's pale neck. She whimpers, her eyes wide with terror. "Stop!" I scream, panic gripping my chest like icy talons. Whirling on the furious woman, I can no longer contain the rage boiling up inside me. "She's the reason you're even still breathing right now, and this is how you repay her?"

"Lies!" she hisses venomously. "She's working for you. Now tell us what poison, or we'll kill the traitor." My fists clench impotently at my sides as I struggle to keep my composure.

"She's not working for me! Just let her go, damn it!"

"Which poison?" the woman demands again, her voice rising to a shriek.

"There is no poison!" I shout, frustration and fear warring within me.

"Which poison?" she screams, and the vampire presses the blade deeper into Beatrice's flesh, drawing a strangled cry.

"There is no fucking poison!" I explode, panic and fury rendering me incoherent. "There are children among you, for heaven's sake! Who in their right mind would poison children?" The woman's eyes glitter with cold menace.

"I don't believe you."

Anger thrums through my veins, burning away any lingering traces of nausea as I stalk toward her, our faces inches apart. "Don't believe me, that's your fucking business," I snarl through gritted teeth. "But let me tell you something. If anything happens to Beatrice, I will kill you before you even think of taking your last breath."

She swallows hard, her bravado faltering for the briefest moment as she meets my blazing stare. I've never threatened anyone like this before, but after witnessing my parents' brutal deaths, something inside me has changed. I'm no longer that meek, helpless girl who could only beg with her tears. Now, I take what I want—or use my fists to get it.

"Mummy, I think the queen is telling the truth," a small voice pipes up. A little vampire girl toddles forward, clutching at the woman's leg. "I don't feel sick." I tear my gaze from the woman to offer the child a tremulous smile, my anger subsiding slightly at her innocent words. "You're so pretty," she says, beaming up at me.

"Thank you, dear. You're very pretty, too." I reach out to pat her tousled curls, but the woman yanks her behind her body with a sharp tug, shielding her protectively. An expected reaction, but it still stings. Lifting my chin defiantly, I meet the woman's glowering stare head-on.

"Leave!" she spits, her lip curling in revulsion.

I can see the truth sinking in behind her eyes; she believes me now about the lack of poison, even if she still wants nothing to do with me or my kind.

"I will," I reply, keeping my tone even. "But before I go, I want to say something." I pause, letting my words sink in as I gaze around at the assembled vampires, my expression earnest. "I know over the years, our kinds have never seen eye to eye. But I believe it doesn't have to be that way anymore. We have a common enemy now, and nothing would serve us better than to join forces to take him down." My gaze flicks to Beatrice, still trembling with the knife at her throat, and my jaw tightens. "I know many of you won't trust a werewolf to watch your back in this war. But I give you my word,

we will. Lord Easterlin is a monster who must be stopped at all costs, and together, we can bring him down." I sweep my eyes over the ragged crowd once more, hoping against hope that some will heed my impassioned plea. "If you decide to join our forces, we'll be at the forest entrance to the vampire kingdom. But not for long—by tomorrow morning, we'll be gone. Goodbye, everyone."

Turning on my heel, I stride over to Beatrice and gently pry her from her captor's grasp, shooting him a withering glare. She sags against me, and we begin making our way back toward my tent.

"I suggest you leave today," the woman's voice rings out, laced with contempt. "Because no one will be joining you."

I don't dignify her parting shot with a response, simply continuing to walk away with Beatrice at my side. I don't believe her words for a second. Among that ragged throng, I saw hardened warriors, including the woman herself. And I know they aren't cowering in fear of the coming war, but because they refuse to accept Lord Easterlin's claim to the vampire throne.

I have hope that at least some of them will see the wisdom in banding together against our common foe. Lord Easterlin has already crowned himself king of the vampire lands—the only reason he would need to amass an army is to launch an invasion of the werewolf nation next.

And I'll be damned if I let that monster set one foot across our borders. Even if it costs me my life.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

We wait all day and through the night, hoping against hope that at least some vampires will heed my impassioned plea to join our forces. But as the first rays of dawn streak the sky, it becomes painfully clear—not a single one has come.

I won't lie; the disappointment stings, even though a part of me expected this very outcome. Squaring my shoulders, I push aside the dejection. We can't linger here any longer.

With Beatrice no longer welcome among them, labeled a traitor, we've decided to drop her off at her home in witch territory before continuing to the werewolf kingdom. Once everyone had finished packing, we set off on our journey.

The trip is a miserable one for me. The lingering nausea from yesterday morning has only worsened, and I can't keep anything down, not even water. Exhausted, I push my seat back and sleep fitfully through most of the ride.

"I can walk; you don't have to carry me," I mumble in protest as Caleb scoops me up once we reach our destination: a serene lake nestled in a grove not far from Beatrice's cabin. We've just arrived in witch territory.

"I didn't say you couldn't," he grunts, depositing me gently on the lush grass at the water's edge.

"Don't worry, a bath in the lake will have her as good as new," Beatrice reassures him. Unlike the healing pond, the waters here possess different restorative properties. Caleb's brow furrows with concern.

"I hope so." Turning to me, he presses a kiss to my forehead. "Mind-link me when you're done."

With one last worried glance, he retreats toward Beatrice's cabin, where we'll spend the night before continuing our journey

tomorrow morning.

"Take off your clothes and get in, dear," Beatrice instructs, kneeling by the shoreline and beginning to chant softly under her breath into the lake.

Stripping down, I step gingerly into the shallows, hissing at the icy caress of the water against my feverish skin. Once I'm submerged up to my shoulders, Beatrice falls silent and pads away, leaving me alone to soak in the enchanted waters.

Leaning back against the grassy bank, I close my eyes and try to clear my mind, focusing only on the gentle lapping of the tiny waves against my body. Almost immediately, I can feel the tightly wound knot of nausea in my belly, beginning to uncoil as Beatrice's magic works its wonders.

I'm just starting to relax when a faint, achingly familiar scent wafts past on the breeze, setting my nerves instantly on edge. Jolting upright, I cast about wildly, searching the tree line for any sign of movement as Marie's frantic voice echoes through my mind.

"That's impossible! We shouldn't have smelled that. We shouldn't have!"

"Maybe we smelled it wrong." I try to rationalize even as the scent intensifies, unmistakable now.

"Probably," Marie concedes, though her tone is laced with doubt.

Unable to shake my sudden unease, I quickly clamber out of the lake and snatch up my towel, wrapping it haphazardly around my dripping form. I head back to Beatrice's.

"You're back already? Do you feel better?" Beatrice asks in surprise as I burst through the front door of her cabin, leaving a trail of damp footprints across the hardwood floors.

"We need to leave. Now!" I bark, not waiting for her response as I stride toward the guest room she'd prepared for me.

"Amelia, what's going on?" She hurries after me, concern furrowing her brow. "Did you see something at the lake?"

"No, but I smelled him," I answer tersely, yanking open drawers and tossing my belongings haphazardly into my duffel. Caleb appears in the doorway, alerted by the commotion.

"Who did you smell?"

"Him," I repeat, my voice cracking despite my efforts to remain stoic. Beatrice's eyes widen as she reaches out to still my frantic packing.

"Who, Amelia? Who did you smell?"

“Him!” I snap, rounding on Caleb as my shoulders slump in defeat. His expression is of confusion.

“Who, Amelia? Who the fuck did you smell out there?” I squeeze my eyes shut, feeling as if the word itself is a lead weight on my tongue.

“Nickolas.” Caleb’s brows knit together incredulously.

“Is that even possible?”

“No!” I shake my head vehemently, resuming my hurried packing as dread coils in my belly. “That’s why I think someone is using his scent to mess with me, and that’s why we need to leave.”

“Amelia…” Beatrice lays a gentle hand on my arm, stilling me once more. When I finally meet her pitying gaze, her following words are like a physical blow. “Witches can’t mimic supernatural scents.”

The implication hangs heavy in the air between us as I struggle to process what she’s suggesting. “But…I smelled him,” I insist weakly, my voice little more than a whisper.

“I know you did, honey.” She pulls me into a comforting embrace, her tone tinged with sadness as she strokes my damp hair. “It’s okay.”

Lifting my gaze to Caleb, I find only a helpless shrug in response to my silent plea for him to contradict her. They both think I’m delusional, still pining for a dead man who betrayed me.

The hurt and anger are like a vise around my chest as I wrench myself from Beatrice’s arms. “I would like to be alone,” I grit out, struggling to keep my tone even. Caleb’s expression is unreadable as he gives a curt nod.

“No problem. I’m right outside if you need me.”

With a last sympathetic look, Beatrice follows him out, leaving me alone with my roiling thoughts and emotions.

Sinking down on the bed, I bury my face in my hands as I replay the moment at the lakeside over and over in my mind. I know what I smelled—that rich earthy scent but is distinctly Nickolas. But if Beatrice is right and it’s not some cruel trick…then how?

The need to prove them wrong drives me back toward the lake, this time with a singular purpose. If I can pinpoint the exact location where I detected his scent, maybe I can bring them there, and they’ll believe me.

But as I scour the entire shoreline, winding my way through the dense underbrush surrounding the water, there’s not even the

faintest trace of that hauntingly familiar aroma. Beginning to doubt myself, I creep closer to the lake's edge, wondering if the waters themselves carry some residual essence of him.

But there's nothing, not even a whisper of his scent on the crisp breeze skimming across the glassy surface. Shoulders slumping in defeat, I turn to head back to the cabin, ready to admit I was wrong and must have imagined the whole thing.

Then, like a physical caress, it washes over me again—rich and earthy and so achingly, undeniably Nickolas. I freeze, paralyzed by shock, as I slowly turn away from the lake.

And there he is, materializing from the shadows of the tree line in all his devastating beauty. My breath catches in my throat as he moves toward me with that confident, predatory grace so intrinsically his.

"Stop!" I cry out, flinging one hand up as if to ward him off, even as tears blur my vision. This has to be some cruel trick of the mind, a waking dream conjured from the darkest recesses of my subconscious desires.

"Amelia..." That deep, velveteen rumble sends a shiver down my spine, the familiar cadence as intoxicating as I remember.

I squeeze my eyes shut, fighting the swell of emotions battering my resolve. "You're not real," I whisper brokenly. "And once I open my eyes, you'll be gone." Slowly, reluctantly, I blink…and he's still there, so close now that I can make out the dusting of darker stubble along his chiseled jaw, the rogue lock of black hair falling across his forehead. "How?" The single syllable is little more than an exhale as the first tear tracks down my cheek, scalding against my chilled skin. He takes another step closer, hand outstretched in wordless entreaty.

"Let me hold you first, then I'll explain."

"No, stay where you are!" I demand, backpedaling instinctively and forgetting the lake's proximity until my heel catches on the muddy bank.

"Amelia!" His shout of alarm is the last thing I register before the icy waters swallow me in their numbing embrace.

I break the surface a moment later, sputtering and choking, only to be hauled bodily out of the shallows by a pair of strong arms. Coughing up what feels like half the lake, I find myself cradled against Nickolas's chest as he carries me back toward solid ground.

"I don't know who the fuck you are," I rasp, my claws extending

to prick menacingly, poised just inches from the point over his heart on his chest. “But I advise you to start explaining.”

Rather than fear, a slow, wolfish smile curves his lips as his gaze rakes over me with amusement. “I never knew you had such a fierce side, little one.”

My claws retract as I hear him call me the pet name he gave me. Only Nickolas and I knew that pet name. With trembling fingers, I reach up to trace the beloved planes of his face, my heart hammering against my ribs.

“Is it really you?” I breathe, hardly daring to hope.

“Yes, little one.” His calloused palm covers my own, the warmth and solidity of his touch sending a jolt of recognition arcing through me down to my very core. “It’s me.”

Marie’s jubilant howl resounds through my mind as the last of the tension bleeds from my body. This is no trick, no figment of desperate longing. Nickolas is here, alive and so gloriously, undeniably real.

“Oh heavens above...” I murmur faintly, the world tilting violently around me as my eyes roll back.

The last coherent thought before blackness claims me is bone-chilling in its implications. If this is truly Nickolas before me...then who the hell did Caleb kill that night?

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CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

NICKOLAS

I'm not sure which is more astonishing, the fact that I survived an arrow piercing my heart or seeing Amelia here before me, her angelic face peaceful in slumber. I owe my life to Ava and her niece. Ava's quick thinking to portal me to her estate, where her niece resided and tended to our wounds, is the only reason Eric and I still draw breath. But even that pales in comparison to the miracle of Amelia's presence.

As I watch the gentle rise and fall of her chest, emotion swells within me, so intense it steals my breath. Tears prick my eyes, and a lump forms in my throat. I never thought I'd gaze upon her beauty again, resigned to a lifetime of yearning for what I'd lost. Yet here she is, her golden hair fanned across my pillow like rays of sunshine as the universe conspired to bring her back to me the very day I dared stroll around witch territory. The sheer improbability of it staggers me.

A soft rustle of sheets pulls me from my reverie. I whip my head toward the bed, drinking in the sight of her.

"You're awake," I say softly from across the room, my voice thick with emotion. She gasps, her mesmerizing blue eyes widening in shock at the sight of me. That's not surprising, considering she believes me dead. "I can explain," I hasten to reassure her, cautiously approaching the bed. "The man you saw your brother kill, it wasn't me. Lord Easterlin found someone with my build and used dark magic to alter his face to mirror mine." Her brow furrows in confusion as I explain, the gears turning behind those intelligent eyes. I can only imagine the hatred that must have consumed her,

believing I murdered her parents in cold blood. If only she knew that was the furthest thing from my mind that fateful night. "Amelia..." I softly call her name, taking her delicate hand in mine. She doesn't recoil from my touch; hope blossoms in my chest. "I didn't kill your parents, and I never intended to. You have to believe me." I search her face imploringly, willing her to see the sincerity in my eyes.

She studies me intently, seconds stretching into an eternity as I await her judgment. "How can I be certain you are not lying or an imposter?" Her words cut like a knife, but I cannot fault her wariness. Rising from the bed, I begin removing my shirt with trembling hands, baring my chest to her scrutiny.

"What are you doing?" she asks sharply, eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Showing you that I am the real Nickolas," I reply, my voice rough with emotion. Slowly, I turn to expose the scars marring my back and the new embellishments I've added in her honor.

"Nickolas, what is this?" She spins me around, eyes widening as she takes in the tattoos of her lush lips now adorning my scars. A physical manifestation of how deeply she is engraved upon my very soul.

"Do you like them?" I ask hopefully, my heart pounding as I await her reaction, craving her approval.

She tilts her head, blonde waves cascading over her shoulder. "I don't know," she replies softly, and my heart clenches painfully in my chest. "I'm still trying to accept that you're alive, that you didn't kill my parents." She steps out of bed and begins pacing agitatedly, her scent wafting around me as she grapples with this upheaval of everything she thought she knew.

"There's something else I need you to know, little one," I say hoarsely, closing the distance between us, needing to feel her warmth.

"What?" She turns those captivating cerulean eyes upon me, uncertainty and longing warring in their depths. I take her face in my hands, gazing deeply into those pools of blue, willing her to see the truth burning in my heart as I whisper the words I've held inside for so long.

"I love you."

Her eyes widen, locking onto mine with an intensity that takes my breath away. I bare my very soul, letting her see the depth of

my love for her. After a breathless moment, she closes the gap between us, capturing my lips in a searing kiss that ignites my blood.

I kiss her with every fiber of my being, savoring the sweet taste of her, the intoxicating scent of hers. My senses are overwhelmed as she winds her arms around my neck, pressing her soft curves flush against me. Fuck! I could kiss her all day and never grow tired of it. When she finally breaks for air, she stares at me with kiss-swollen lips and a heaving chest, desire darkening her eyes.

"I've missed you," I murmur, resting my forehead against hers, relishing the feel of her silken skin.

"I've missed you too," she admits breathlessly, placing her palm over my thundering heart.

Emboldened, I grip her sexy ass, lifting her effortlessly into my arms as if she weighs nothing. She wraps those endless legs around my waist, clinging to me as I carry her back to the bed.

"We have much to discuss, but let me make love to you first," I rasp against her lips, my voice rough with need. "I need to feel you, all of you, surrounding me again. I need to show you how much I love you."

She answers with a fervent kiss, murmuring her ardent acquiescence against my lips. "Make love to me, Nickolas. Show me."

And I did, pouring every ounce of my heart, my soul, my very being into worshipping her body, cherishing her as she deserves, loving her with an intensity that stole my breath and shook me to my core. In her arms, I was finally home.

AMELIA

Nickolas gently places me on the bed, his smoldering gaze fixed on me, watching my every move with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine. He takes off his shirt with deliberate slowness, revealing his sculpted chest and abs that make my mouth water. He moves toward me like a predator stalking his prey, a sensual promise in his eyes.

His fingers graze my skin as he slowly pulls my dress over my head, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. He lays a soft, reverent kiss on my neck, and my back arches involuntarily, craving more of his touch. My dress falls away, leaving me bare before him, and I flush as I remember I didn't put on underwear in my haste.

"Beautiful," Nickolas breathes, his voice rough with desire as his eyes drink me in hungrily. I feel worshipped and adored, as if I'm the most exquisite thing he's ever seen.

He climbs above me, his strong hands strangling my waist as he captures my lips in a passionate, consuming kiss that sucks the air right out of my lungs. I feel his scorching touch everywhere—my ankles, my thighs, my belly, my breasts—before coming to rest possessively on my neck. He trails his lips down my body, leaving a path of fire in his wake. I close my eyes, moaning wantonly as wetness pools between my thighs, my core throbbing with need.

"I've missed kissing you like this," he rasps against my skin, moving his hot mouth back up my body to nibble on my ear. "I have missed it so fucking much."

He pulls his lips away from my body and begins to hastily remove his pants, his eyes hooded and filled with desire and the love he declared moments ago. My heart swells with emotion, scarcely able to believe this is real.

He moves back to me, hovering above me like a dark angel. With excruciating slowness, he enters me inch by delicious inch, letting me adjust to his impressive size before beginning to thrust with deep, purposeful strokes.

"Nickolas," I gasp, feeling him fill and stretch me so perfectly.

"Fuck," he groans, his eyes boring into mine as he grips my legs and wraps them around his waist, driving himself even deeper. The new angle has me seeing stars, my nails digging into the sheets as pleasure coils tightly in my core.

He takes his time with each thrust as if he never wants this moment to end. I'm lost to the sensations, my eyes rolling back as my release builds, but they snap open at his commanding tone. "I want to see your eyes as I make love to you," Nickolas grits out, his hips undulating sinuously. I struggle to maintain eye contact, my pleasure cresting higher and higher until it finally crashes over me, and I cum hard.

"I love you," I scream, staring into his soul as I come apart in his arms, stripped bare in every sense.

"I love you too," he growls against my neck before sinking his teeth into my flesh, marking me as his as he finds his own release, filling me with his seed.

I lay frozen, my mind struggling to process the enormity of what just happened.

"Amelia? Are you okay?" Nickolas asks, concern lacing his voice as he pulls out and releases my legs.

"Yes, just...shocked," I manage, meeting his searching gaze.

"You're mine, little one. It was high time everyone knew it, too." His words make my heart leap, and my cheeks heat.

"Come here," he murmurs, pulling me into a searing kiss as he slides back inside my welcoming heat. "Are you okay for another round?" I nod, smiling up at him with all the love in my heart. "That's my girl." He begins to thrust again, harder and faster, and I surrender myself to the pleasure once more, knowing I am exactly where I belong.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

“Can I see them again?” I ask, my voice breathless with anticipation, a giddy smile stretching across my face as I wait for Nickolas to reveal his back once more, to show me the tattoo of my lips adorning his scars. Even now, the reality of it steals the air from my lungs, making my heart flutter wildly in my chest. His answering smile is soft and indulgent, his eyes glowing with warmth as he slowly turns, baring his back to me. I suck in a sharp breath at the sight, my fingers itching to trace the delicate lines of ink, to map the ridges and valleys of his scars. I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to seeing this tangible proof of his love, this permanent declaration etched into his very skin. “Can I touch them?” I whisper, my voice hushed with reverence, knowing how sensitive he is about anyone laying hands on his scars, even me. Nickolas turns to face me, his gaze locking with mine, the intensity in his eyes stealing the breath from my lungs.

“My body is yours to do with as you please, little one,” he murmurs, his voice low and rough with emotion.

He spins back around, presenting his back to me once more, and my heart swells with a love so fierce, so all-consuming, it brings tears to my eyes. Smiling through the sheen of moisture, I reach out with trembling fingers, tracing the raised edges of his scars, the smooth lines of my lips. I press a soft kiss to each mark, each reminder of the pain he’s endured, the strength he’s shown.

“I love it,” I breathe, gently tugging him down to lie on his back, resting my chin on his broad chest as I gaze up at him, my eyes shining with adoration.

“I’m happy you do,” he rumbles, his fingers threading through

my hair, trailing down the length of my spine to cup my ass, giving it a playful spank. I meet his gaze, my expression sobering as the weight of all we still need to discuss settles over me.

"We have a lot to talk about," I murmur, my fingers absently tracing patterns on his chest.

"Yeah, we do," he agrees, his hands sliding up to grip my waist, effortlessly lifting me to straddle his hips. My palms splay across his chest, my fingers dancing over the ridges of his abs, marveling at the play of muscle beneath his warm skin.

"Nickolas," I gasp, my voice breathy and strained as I feel him hardening beneath me, his hard-on pressing insistently against my pooling core.

"I'm not the one with the dripping pussy against my dick," he growls, his words sending a bolt of liquid heat straight to my center. In one smooth motion, he lifts me up and sheathes himself inside me, filling me to the hilt and stretching me deliciously around his thick length. "Fuck," he groans, his eyes fluttering shut as he bottoms out inside me. "Why does it feel like the first time every time?"

A fierce blush stains my cheeks at his words, a heady mix of pleasure and pride unfurling in my chest. Slowly, I begin to rock against him, grinding my hips in a sensual circle, relishing the guttural moan that tears from his throat.

"Nickolas," I whimper, his name a breathless litany on my lips as I increase my pace, chasing the building pressure at the apex of my thighs.

I let my head fall back, my eyes drifting shut as I lose myself in the sensation of him moving inside me, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of my hips hard enough to bruise. My release builds quick in tandem, the coil of tension winding tighter and tighter, threatening to snap at any moment.

Nickolas's hand slides up my body to wrap around my throat, applying just enough pressure to make my head swim, to intensify the pleasure coursing through my veins until it borders on pain, exquisite and all-consuming.

"Nickolas," I keen, my toes curling as I teeter on the edge of oblivion, desperate for the final push to send me tumbling over.

"Fuck, little one," he grunts, his hips pistoning up to meet my downward thrusts, the obscene slap of skin on skin echoing in the charged air around us.

“I’m coming,” I scream, my release slamming into me, my walls clenching vice-tight around him as I shatter, wave after wave of pleasure crashing over me until I’m boneless and spent.

Nickolas gentles his grip on my throat, his hand sliding down to cup my breast, kneading the sensitive flesh as his other arm bands around my waist, lifting me up and down on his cock as he chases his own release. A few more deep, powerful thrusts and he’s spilling inside me with a hoarse cry, his cum painting my inner walls, dripping down my thighs.

I collapse against his chest, my heart hammering against my ribs as I struggle to catch my breath. Nickolas wraps his arms around me, holding me close, his fingers tracing idle patterns on my sweat-slick skin.

“We really need to talk,” I mumble, my words muffled against his chest, my limbs heavy and languid in the aftermath of our lovemaking.

“Yeah, we do,” he agrees, pressing a tender kiss to the top of my head. But first, he rolls us over, blanketing my body with his own as he takes me one more time, slow and deep and achingly tender, a physical affirmation of the love we share.

Finally, we manage to drag ourselves out of bed and into the shower, our hands roaming and exploring as we wash away the evidence of our passion. Once we’re dressed, Nickolas takes my hand, leading me out of the room with a mysterious smile.

“There’s someone you need to see,” he says, his eyes sparkling with anticipation. “I think you’ll be happy to see them.”

Curiosity burns through me as we descend the stairs, my mind racing with possibilities. But nothing could have prepared me for the sight that greets me at the bottom.

“Took you guys long enough,” an achingly familiar voice teases, and my head whips around, my eyes widening in shock as they land on the man standing there, his arms open wide, a grin splitting his handsome face.

“Eric?” I breathe, hardly daring to believe my eyes. But it’s him, it’s really him, alive and whole and here.

With a choked sob, I race down the remaining steps, flinging myself into his waiting arms, burying my face in his chest as tears of joy stream down my face. “I thought you were dead, too,” I whisper, my voice thick with emotion, my fingers clutching at his shirt as if to reassure myself he’s real, that this isn’t just a beautiful

dream.

"It'll take a lot more than that to kill me, princess," he chuckles, his arms tightening around me, his chin resting atop my head. "I'm tougher than I look."

"I can't wait for Lily to see you," I say, pulling back to beam up at him through my tears. "She's going to be over the moon."

At the mention of his mate, Eric's eyes soften, a wistful longing filling their depths. "How are they doing?" he asks, his voice rough with barely contained emotion. "Lily and the baby?"

"They're both perfect," I assure him, giving his hand a comforting squeeze. "Healthy and happy and waiting for you to come home."

"I can't wait to see them," he breathes, his eyes shining with unshed tears. "To hold them in my arms again."

"Whenever you're ready," I promise, my heart aching with happiness for my friend, for the reunion I know is coming.

But then Eric's expression shifts, curiosity and concern warring in his gaze as he focuses on me once more. "Enough about me," he says, linking his arm through mine as he steers us toward the living room. "I want to hear about you. How did you come back from the dead? What happened?"

The living room is as breathtakingly beautiful as the rest of the house, all plush fabrics and gleaming surfaces that speak of wealth and taste. I make my way to the nearest couch, ready to sink into its inviting cushions, but before I can even sit down, Nickolas sweeps me up into his arms and deposits me on his lap.

"Whenever we're together, this is where you sit," he murmurs, adjusting me on his thighs, his arm wrapping securely around my waist, his hand splaying possessively over my belly.

A soft smile tugs at my lips, warmth blooming in my chest at his casual display of affection. If someone had told me even a few short months ago that Nickolas would be this clingy, this openly demonstrative with his love, I would have laughed in their face. But now, feeling the solid strength of his body beneath me, the tender way he holds me close, I can't imagine anything feeling more right.

"Let's hear it," Eric prompts, settling into the armchair across from us, his eyes alight with curiosity.

And so I tell them everything, and once I am done, Nickolas shares what happened to him and Eric. It explains why the whole house smells of Ava—it's her house. She's a bitch, but I admit she

has impeccable taste.

"I can't believe Lord Easterlin went back for the fake head," I muse, shaking my head in disbelief at the depths of the man's depravity.

"He had to," Eric explains, his expression grim. "There was no way the court or the people were going to believe Nickolas was truly dead without proof."

"True," I concede, my heart clenching at the thought of all Nickolas has endured. I reach for his hand, which rests on my waist, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Nickolas, I'm so sorry about your uncle and Ava. I know how much they meant to you." Even though they were my least favorite people, I know they meant the world to Nickolas.

"It's okay," he murmurs, his thumb rubbing soothing circles on my belly. He's been doing it since we sat down. I wonder why he's suddenly fascinated by it, but I push the thought aside for the moment.

"So, what's the plan to take down that bastard?" I ask, my voice hardening with determination.

"We have the element of surprise since he thinks I'm dead," Nickolas muses, his brow furrowed in thought. "But it's not enough. My uncle's private army in witch territory is nothing compared to Lord Easterlin's forces."

"What if I told you we had the werewolf kingdom's support?" I offer.

"What do you mean?" Nickolas asks, his eyes widening as he turns me to face him fully, his grip on my waist tightening.

"While we were in vampire territory, we discovered that Lord Easterlin is gathering men for a war," I explain, the words tumbling out in a rush. "The werewolf kingdom is the only nation whose leader he failed to kill. Obviously, he's preparing to fight us, which means taking him down is as much our business as it is yours."

"Wow," Eric breathes, shaking his head in wonder. "I never thought I'd see the day when werewolves and vampires would join forces to fight a common enemy."

"Neither did I," Nickolas admits, his expression thoughtful. "But it doesn't actually solve our problem. Werewolf and vampire soldiers won't agree to fight side by side, even if Amelia, the werewolf princess, becomes the queen of vampires." His last statement takes me by surprise, a sudden tightness gripping my

chest.

“You thought making me queen might make the alliance more acceptable?” I ask, holding my breath as I wait for his answer, a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. If that’s the only reason he considered making me his queen, I’m not sure my heart can take it.

“Yes, it crossed my mind,” he admits, his gaze steady on mine.

“Hmm, okay,” I murmur, trying to keep the hurt from my voice, the sting of his words like a physical ache in my chest. I know becoming queen won’t be easy, but I’d hoped, foolishly perhaps, that he wanted me by his side since I’m his mate.

“Amelia, what the fuck are you thinking about?” Nickolas demands, his voice cutting through my spiraling thoughts. “Why are you sad?” My eyes widen in realization, a silent curse echoing in my mind. We’ve completed the mating process, which means we can feel each other’s emotions unless we actively block the connection. How could I be so careless, leaving my walls down while grappling with something so personal, so raw?

“Nothing,” I say quickly, shaking my head, my gaze dropping to my lap.

“Are you upset about the idea of ruling the vampire kingdom?” he presses, his fingers gentle on my chin as he turns my face back to meet his searching gaze.

“No,” I whisper, my heart in my throat, the word barely audible over the roaring in my ears.

“Then why are you sad?” he asks, his eyes boring into mine, a single brow arched in silent demand for an explanation. I remain silent, the words lodged in my throat, too painful, too humiliating to voice aloud. How can I possibly tell him how much it hurts, the idea that he sees making me queen as nothing more than a political pawn, a means to an end?

“Because you just fucking told her the wrong reason you wanted to make her your queen,” Eric interjects, his voice cutting through the charged silence. Nickolas’s gaze snaps to mine, understanding dawning in his eyes.

“You think I only want you as my queen because it might help me win the war,” he says, more statement than a question. I shrug, unable to meet his gaze, my heart too raw, too exposed under the weight of his scrutiny. “Look at me,” he commands, his voice soft but unyielding. I roll my eyes, a halfhearted attempt at defiance, before finally dragging my gaze back to his, steeling myself for

whatever I might find there.

To my surprise, a small smile tugs at the corner of his mouth, the sight of it sending a traitorous flutter through my belly despite the hurt still lingering in my chest. “I have wanted to make you my queen from the moment you claimed my heart, Amelia,” he says, his voice low and genuine, his eyes burning with an intensity that steals the breath from my lungs. “It wasn’t just a passing thought, a means to an end. You are the only one who could ever truly own that throne in every way that matters.”

“Really?” I breathe, hardly daring to believe the words, the ache in my chest transforming into something warm and bright, a fragile hope unfurling in my heart. He nods, his gaze never leaving mine.

“Who else owns that fucking throne but you?”

Hearing him say the word “own,” knowing he means it in every sense, banishes the last lingering traces of doubt from my mind. The warmth in my chest expands, filling me up until I feel like I might burst from the sheer force of it, tears of joy pricking at the backs of my eyes. It feels too good to be true, this perfect, shining moment where everything falls into place, where I finally understand the depths of his love for me.

Unable to contain the swell of emotion, I surge forward, capturing his lips in a passionate kiss, my arms winding around his neck as I pour every ounce of my love into the press of my mouth against his. Nickolas responds in kind, his hands tightening on my waist, pulling me impossibly closer as he drinks me in, the taste of him exploding across my tongue, making me moan into the kiss.

“I think that’s enough,” Eric coughs, the sound of his voice breaking through the haze of desire, reminding us we’re not alone.

We break apart reluctantly, my cheeks flushing hot as I bury my face in Nickolas’s neck, trying to catch my breath to calm the frantic racing of my heart.

“You two can fuck each other’s brains out later,” Eric teases, his eyes sparkling with mirth. “Right now, we have a war to plan.”

“Actually, I had a thought about that,” I say, lifting my head to meet Eric’s gaze, my mind already racing ahead. “Nickolas, why don’t you try talking to your men first? They have to know they don’t have the numbers to win against Lord Easterlin on their own. If you explain the situation, make them see that joining forces with the werewolves is our only path to victory; they might be more open to the idea than we think.” Nickolas considers my words for a

long moment, his brow furrowed in thought.

"It's worth a try," he concedes at last, his fingers absently tracing patterns on my hip. "The worst they can do is say no."

"Exactly," I agree, a flicker of hope sparking in my chest. "And if they agree, it could change everything." Eric nods, his expression thoughtful.

"It's a good plan," he says, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "But we need to be prepared for every eventuality. Let's go over the details and make sure we have all our bases covered."

We spend the next few hours deep in discussion, going over every aspect of the coming war, every possible scenario and contingency plan. By the time Eric finally takes his leave, bidding us goodnight with a knowing wink and a sly grin, my head is spinning with information, my body heavy with exhaustion.

Nickolas and I make our way upstairs, his hand warm and solid in mine. But as we reach the landing, he says something that stops me in my tracks, my brow furrowing in confusion.

"I think it would be safer for you to stay in witch territory rather than the werewolf kingdom," he says, his voice carefully neutral. I blink at him, uncomprehending.

"I'm fighting in the war," I say slowly, as if speaking to a child. "You know that, right?" He chuckles, the sound devoid of humor.

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am," I counter, my voice rising with anger, my hands clenching into fists at my sides. How dare he try to sideline me?

"No, you're not," he repeats, his jaw clenching with stubborn resolve. "End of discussion."

"You can't be serious right now," I sputter, my eyes wide with disbelief. "I want to fight, Nickolas, and I will!"

"You're not fighting, Amelia. Especially not now that you're pregnant." His words hit me like a physical blow, stealing the air from my lungs and the ground from beneath my feet.

"Who's pregnant?" I whisper, my voice trembling, my mind reeling as I stare at him in shock.

"You are," he says softly, his eyes never leaving mine. "Unmask your scent, little one. See for yourself." With shaking hands, I do as he says, allowing my true scent to fill the air around us. And there it is, the unmistakable aroma of new life growing inside me, the hint of something uniquely vampire mingling with the scent that is purely me.

“We’re pregnant,” I breathe, the words feeling foreign on my tongue, too big, too momentous to be real. I stare at Nickolas, my eyes wide and glassy with unshed tears, a million thoughts swirling through my head, a thousand emotions warring for dominance in my heart.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

“What the fuck did you just say?” A familiar voice booms from the bottom of the stairs, startling me. I spin around, my heart leaping into my throat, to find Caleb standing there, his eyes wide with shock. Oh, heavens above! How could I have forgotten about Caleb? He must have been worried sick about me. I wonder how he found me here, of all places.

“King Nickolas!” Caleb adds, his brows furrowing in confusion as he takes in Nickolas standing by my side. Panic grips me, and I quickly move to stand before Nickolas, shielding him with my body. I can only imagine what Caleb must be thinking: that Nickolas survived somehow, and now he needs to finish the job. “He’s real?” Caleb asks incredulously, pointing at Nickolas after noticing my protective stance.

“Yes, and before you try to do anything, please hear me out,” I plead, my voice trembling slightly. Caleb closes his eyes, shaking his head in disbelief before crossing his arms over his chest.

“You have one minute,” he grits out, his jaw clenched.

We move back downstairs, and I waste no time explaining everything to Caleb, the words tumbling out of me in a desperate rush. He stares at us both, his expression morphing from anger to shock as I finish. I can’t blame him—I was just as stunned when I learned the truth.

“So let me get this straight,” Caleb says slowly as if trying to process it all. “You gave up your quest for revenge and wished to meet our parents to discuss it, but a fake was sent in your place who ended up killing them?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it,” I confirm, nodding solemnly.

“Wow. I don’t know if I should fucking believe you, but that mark on my sister’s neck is telling me I should,” Caleb mutters, his eyes zeroing in on the fresh bite on my neck. My hand unconsciously moves to rub the healing skin.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but I truly don’t wish to take revenge anymore,” Nickolas says earnestly, his eyes shining with sincerity. “The death of your parents would only bring Amelia sadness and hatred toward me. I couldn’t live with myself if she hated me. She’s my world. Her happiness means everything to me. I have chosen to live with the guilt of not avenging my father’s death if it means Amelia will be mine forever.” Tears fill my eyes as I listen to Nickolas bare his soul, and I sniffle, trying to hold them back. Sometimes, I forget the enormous sacrifice he made in choosing to be with me. Words can’t express how grateful I am for what he did. “Why are you crying?” Nickolas asks softly; concern etched on his handsome face.

“Your words,” I whisper, my voice choked with emotion. “I didn’t realize…I didn’t know I meant that much to you.”

“You do, Amelia,” he says fiercely, his eyes burning into mine with an intensity that steals the air from my lungs. “You mean everything to me.” He lays a tender kiss on my forehead. The tears spill over, rolling down my cheeks, and he gently wipes them away, his touch infinitely loving.

“I’m speechless,” Caleb mutters, shaking his head in wonder as he watches our exchange. He turns to me then, his gaze searching, his expression serious. “Do you feel the same way about him, Lia? Does he mean as much to you as you clearly do to him?”

“He does,” I breathe, tearing my gaze away from Caleb to meet Nickolas’s eyes, my heart in my throat. “I thought I could live in a world without you, but I was so wrong. You are everything to me, Nickolas. I wish I could take away the burden of your guilt and share the weight of it with you. But since I can’t, I promise to spend every day showing you how grateful I am for the choice you made and for the love you’ve given me. I love you with every beat of my heart.”

“I love you too, Amelia,” he breathes, resting his forehead against mine. I close my eyes, inhaling his comforting scent that always soothes my soul. We stay like that, lost in each other until Caleb clears his throat pointedly.

“Enough, guys. I get it. You love each other,” he huffs, but I can

hear the smile in his voice.

"Sorry," I say sheepishly, pulling away from Nickolas.

"I know it's a lot to take in," Nickolas says, his arm sliding around my waist, pulling me into the solid warmth of his side. "And I want to apologize for almost killing you before. But I couldn't imagine my life without your sister, and I know your approval would mean the world to her."

Caleb is silent for a long moment, his gaze assessing as it flicks between us, weighing the sincerity of Nickolas's words. Finally, he sighs, his shoulders slumping with resignation.

"As much as it pains me to admit it, I believe you, Nickolas. I can see how much you love my sister. But I'm not the one you need to convince."

"Dad!" Caleb and I exclaim in unison.

"Yes, he's not going to be so easy to convince that you love Amelia and wish the best for her," Caleb warns.

"I know," Nickolas says, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me closer. "But I'm ready to do whatever it takes."

"Good," Caleb says, a hint of approval in his voice. "Because we leave for the werewolf kingdom in an hour. But first, tell me you were joking about Amelia being pregnant." I hold my breath, trying to gauge my brother's reaction, unsure if he'll be happy about the news or not.

"I was not. She's pregnant," Nickolas states, his voice ringing with pride and joy.

"But I can't smell a pup on her," Caleb argues, confusion marring his brow.

"That's because of who Amelia is," Nickolas explains cryptically.

"Who I am? I don't understand," I say, my own brow furrowing.

"When I marked you, the shock caused you to unmask and mask your scent in a split second, but it was enough for me to smell her," Nickolas elaborates, turning to face me.

"Her?" I repeat, the corners of my mouth twitching up into a huge smile.

"Yes, her," he confirms, placing his hand over my still-flat belly and rubbing it gently.

"You already think it's a girl?" I ask, my heart swelling with love.

"Yeah, I do," Nickolas says, grinning broadly. He looks so incredibly happy about my pregnancy that it takes my breath away. I know he says he loves me, and I believe him, but you can love

someone and not be ready for a child. Seeing how much he wants to start a family with me makes my heart feel like it might burst.

"Okay," I say, beaming at him. "But I still don't understand how I couldn't tell. It's my own body; I should have been able to sense it."

"The baby is a vampire, so as long as your scent is masked, we won't be able to smell her scent either," Nickolas clarifies.

"That makes sense, but how can you be sure she's a vampire?" I counter, my curiosity piqued.

"I'm not certain, but it's the best explanation I've got," he admits with a shrug.

"It tracks for me, too," Caleb chimes in, his gaze thoughtful as he studies me. "But the real question is, do you want this baby, Amelia? Are you ready to be a mother?"

"It might have caught me off guard, but I'm excited either way," I assure him, smiling softly.

"Then I'm happy for you, baby sis," Caleb says, pulling me into a tight hug.

"Thank you," I whisper, hugging him back just as fiercely, grateful for his support and understanding.

As we prepare to leave for the werewolf kingdom, I feel a sense of peace wash over me. Yes, we still have challenges ahead, but with Nickolas by my side and my family's love, I know we can face anything. Our little miracle is just the beginning of our happily ever after.

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I tap my feet against the floor, my nerves fraying with each passing second as I wait for Dad to say something. We arrived back in the werewolf kingdom an hour ago. Nickolas just finished pouring his heart out to Dad, explaining everything that happened. He apologized profusely for nearly killing him on his birthday. He declared his unwavering love for me and his desire to build a life together. But Dad remains silent, his expression unreadable as he stares at Nickolas, who stands rigid with tension, his shoulders taut as he awaits Dad's judgment.

When Dad finally rises from the couch, Nickolas and I follow suit, the room so quiet you could hear a pin drop. I interlock my fingers with Nickolas's, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze. "Everything is going to be alright," I whisper into his mind. Since

we have completed the mating process, we can send messages down our bond.

“Welcome to the family, son,” Dad says, his voice warm as he pulls Nickolas in for a hug. Relief washes over me, and I release the breath I didn’t realize I was holding, a grin splitting my face. But my joy is short-lived as I notice Mom’s stony expression.

“I’m sorry, but it’s going to take more than that for me to believe you,” she says, shaking her head, her eyes hard with distrust. My heart plummets, a cold dread seeping into my bones. I was so focused on winning Dad over that I didn’t anticipate Mom’s resistance, especially since she seemed to understand my love for Nickolas before.

“You can name anything you wish for me to do to prove my love for your daughter because I do love her with every fiber of my being,” Nickolas declares, his voice ringing with conviction.

“That’s good to know, but before I think of something for you to do, she stays in the werewolf kingdom,” Mom states firmly, moving to my side and grasping my hand, pulling me away from Nickolas.

“Mom...” I whisper, pleading, but she silences me with a single, sharp glare. I glance at Nickolas, feeling his emotions roiling through our bond—panic, desperation, a fear of losing me again. He’s trying to maintain a composed facade, but I can sense his inner turmoil. I think he even forgot I could feel his emotions now.

Unable to bear his anguish, I pull my hand from Mom’s and rush to Nickolas, needing to comfort him. “Amelia!” Mom calls after me, but I ignore her, focused solely on my mate.

I press my forehead against his, gazing into his eyes through my lashes. “I promise you, nothing will keep us apart again. My mom will come around. Just give her time,” I whisper to him, my breath fanning his face. He closes his eyes, absorbing my reassurance, before opening them again, determination burning bright.

“I will do everything in my power to make sure that happens,” he vows, sealing his promise with a tender kiss to my forehead. He turns to face Mom, his jaw set with resolve. “Amelia is my world, and I swear you will see that in time.”

“I’ll be waiting,” Mom replies coolly, taking my hand once more and leading me out of the room.

I glance back at Nickolas, mouthing, “I’ll see you later. Love you.”

“I love you too,” he responds, his eyes never leaving mine until

I'm out of sight.

Mom practically drags me to her room, slamming the door shut behind us. She paces the floor, her mind clearly churning with thoughts. I decide to break the suffocating silence.

"I know it's a lot to take in, but I'm telling you, Nickolas isn't pretending. He loves me and has given up his quest for revenge," I insist, my voice trembling with emotion. Mom stops pacing and turns to face me, her eyes softening as she approaches me by the bed. She takes my hands in hers, rubbing them gently before meeting my gaze.

"I want to believe you, dear. I truly do. But a part of me worries that he might be lying, that this is just another scheme to take revenge on us when we least expect it," she confesses, her voice heavy with concern. I sigh, understanding her fears.

"Do you know why I believe him?" She shakes her head, waiting for me to continue. "I feel it, Mom," I say, my hand moving to the mark on my neck. "Thanks to this, I feel his love for me every time he says it, and I see it in his eyes."

"Oh, Amelia," Mom breathes, cupping my face with her hand. "How can I believe it as you do?"

"Keep your heart open, and you will see it, too," I assure her, my eyes shining with conviction.

"Alright, I'll try. And once I do, I will personally escort you to the vampire kingdom," she promises, a glimmer of hope in her voice.

"Thank you, Mom," I whisper, pulling her into a tight embrace.

"Anything for you, dear," she murmurs, rubbing my back soothingly.

I'm relieved that Nickolas and I decided not to tell her about my pregnancy. It would have only added to her worries about my well-being. I can't fault her for her concerns; accepting Nickolas's love would mean entrusting me to his protection in vampire territory, where his people may not be as accepting of our union. She must be worried about how I'll cope and whether Nickolas will truly keep me safe. But I know he will. And I hope that with time, she'll come to see it too.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY

I rush downstairs, my heart pounding with anticipation, not just for breakfast but for the chance to see Nickolas. Being in the same house but sleeping in separate rooms has been torture, especially with Mom still not trusting him, even though a month has passed since our arrival. She also discovered my pregnancy, thanks to my growing bump and unexplainable morning sickness. Despite her reservations about Nickolas, she's thrilled to be a grandmother again and can't wait for the new addition to our family.

The past month has been eerily quiet, with no word from Lord Easterlin, which troubles us all. But we've been using this time to prepare diligently for the impending war. Nickolas is adamant about me staying out of the fight, even though I've assured him I'm fit enough. His men have been training relentlessly alongside our werewolf warriors. Today, we plan to discuss taking the fight directly to Lord Easterlin.

As I approach Nickolas's room, a smile spreads across my face the moment I see him stepping out of the bathroom, a towel hanging low on his waist. My eyes hungrily roam over his chiseled abs, water droplets glistening on his skin, making him look even more irresistible.

"You know all of this is yours," he says with a cocky grin, catching me gawking at him.

"I know," I reply, moving closer, drawn to him like a moth to a flame. He pulls me into a tight embrace, and I don't care that my shirt gets damp as I rise on my tiptoes to capture his lips in a passionate kiss.

"I missed you," he murmurs against my lips, his hands gripping my ass possessively, igniting a fire in my core.

"I missed you too," I breathe, deepening the kiss, my tongue

exploring the warmth of his mouth. I wrap my legs around his waist, pressing myself against him, craving his touch.

"Are you up for a quickie?" he asks, his hardness pressing against my belly, fueling my desire.

"Yes," I reply without hesitation, yanking my shirt over my head, desperate to feel his skin against mine.

Our lovemaking is swift but passionate, and as we enter the dining room, it's clear that everyone knows what we've been up to. Alissa's knowing smirk says it all. Nickolas and I take our seats, joining the others, silently praying they won't tease us mercilessly as they usually do.

"How are the fights going so far?" Dad asks Nickolas as he fills my plate with pancakes. He only eats because of me, and that never fails to make my heart swell with love.

"They've reduced," Nickolas replies, referring to the clashes between vampires and werewolves on the training grounds. The deep-seated hatred between our kinds runs deep, and even though the leaders of both kingdoms have come to forgive each other, their people aren't as open-minded. But we still hold onto hope. Both kingdoms need each other right now, so they have no choice but to learn to tolerate one another and, hopefully, one day, accept each other fully.

"That's good to hear. What about the cave warriors? Have they finally agreed to join us?" Dad inquires, referring to the vampires Caleb and I helped during our last encounter. My hunch was correct —they refused to fight for Lord Easterlin after he killed Nickolas, their beloved king, and sought refuge in that cave.

"Not yet, but I'm hopeful they'll come around," Nickolas says, his voice tinged with optimism.

Dad nods, and we continue eating, discussing war preparations between bites. After breakfast, we head to the training grounds, opting to observe rather than train immediately since we just ate.

"Do you think you could beat me in a fight, Nickolas?" Caleb asks, sauntering over to where Nickolas and I stand.

"I would crush you," Nickolas retorts, his signature cockiness on full display. Caleb smirks in response.

"I'd love to see you try," he challenges, opening his arms wide as he backs away, goading Nickolas.

"You know you could die from this," Nickolas warns playfully, moving to the center of the field.

"Enough talk. Show me what you've got," Caleb demands, assuming a fighting stance.

"Don't you think you need to shift first?" Nickolas asks, mirroring Caleb's stance.

"To take you down? I can do that without shifting," Caleb boasts, launching his fist at Nickolas, who deftly dodges the blow.

For the next hour, I watch my brother and my mate engage in a thrilling dance, each trying to land a hit on the other, both drenched in sweat, drawing the attention of every woman in the vicinity. Pride swells in my chest, knowing that they can only look at Nickolas, but never touch, because he's mine and mine alone.

"I think that's enough, you two. The ladies need to train," I call out, pulling their focus to me. They glance around, noticing the crowd that has gathered, consisting of more women than men, some of whom I suspect aren't even warriors.

"Because you said so, I'll let him go untouched this time," Caleb concedes, stepping back from Nickolas and peeling off his sweat-soaked shirt. The collective gasp that follows makes me chuckle, but what Nickolas does next is even more outrageous.

"Yeah, right," he says with a mischievous grin, removing his own shirt and deliberately wiping his abs, drawing even more attention to his godlike physique. I can't believe they're showing off like this. Men!

Nickolas strides back to me, attempting to wrap his arms around me, but I quickly dodge his advance. "Don't come near me," I warn, scrunching my nose in mock disgust.

"Why? I don't smell that bad," he protests, swinging his arm at me, which I narrowly avoid.

"You do," I insist, pinching my nose for emphasis. "Stay away."

"No way. You need to get some of this," he declares, his movements becoming more determined as he tries to transfer his sweat onto me. I take off running, giggling as I flee from his pursuit.

"Don't come close to me," I squeal, glancing over my shoulder occasionally to gauge his progress.

"Oh, mate, don't let me catch you," Nickolas whispers menacingly in my mind, sending a delicious shiver down my spine. His words, dripping with sensuality, set my blood on fire.

"You can try, but I doubt you will," I taunt him, pushing myself to run faster, exhilarated by the thrill of the chase.

As I sprint through the forest, a thought crosses my mind: never

in my wildest dreams did I imagine I'd find myself being chased by Nickolas in these very woods where I grew up. If my mate were a fellow werewolf, perhaps, but definitely not the king of vampires. It's a testament to how far we've come, and I couldn't be happier. The fact that he just had a training session with my brother is surreal in the best possible way.

"Tsk, this was easier than I thought," Nickolas says, appearing before me with a triumphant grin, pulling me from my reverie. I must have been distracted by my thoughts, allowing him to gain ground.

"Nickolas," I say, putting my hands up in a feeble attempt to keep him at bay as I take a step back.

"I told you," he growls, grabbing me by the waist and pulling me flush against his chest, "you shouldn't let me catch you, mate." His hot breath fans across my neck, igniting a fire within me that spreads to my very core.

"Eww," I say, even though disgust is the furthest thing from my mind, my body burning with desire.

"Eww?" he repeats, arching a brow, his eyes hooded with lust.

"Yes," I breathe, my resolve crumbling under his smoldering gaze.

"You'll be saying 'eww' a lot more by the time I'm done with you," he promises, licking a tantalizing trail along my neck.

"Nickolas," I giggle, closing my eyes as warmth pools between my thighs.

"I haven't even started, love," he chuckles, capturing my lips in a passionate kiss that steals the breath from my lungs, as it always does.

True to his word, by the time Nickolas is finished with me, I've ewwed—or rather, moaned—so much and so loudly that I can barely speak. His talented tongue has explored every inch of my skin, bringing me to the heights of pleasure, not once but twice. Sated and spent, we make our way back to the castle, shower, and head for dinner.

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Later that night, as I lay wrapped in Nickolas's arms, the acrid scent of something burning jolts me from my slumber. I sit up abruptly, my heart pounding in my chest as I scan the room, searching for the source of the fire, but find nothing amiss.

"What's wrong?" Nickolas asks, his voice thick with sleep, roused

by my sudden movement.

"Something is wrong," I say, a sense of unease settling in the pit of my stomach. I throw the covers off my body and step out of bed, pulling Nickolas's shirt over my head as I move toward the fireplace, checking to see if we left it burning.

"I can smell it too," Nickolas says, climbing out of bed and hastily pulling on his boxers before joining me in my search for the source of the fire.

"I don't think it's in here," I murmur, realizing the smell is emanating from outside the room.

"Yeah, let's put on proper clothes and go check," Nickolas suggests, a hint of concern in his voice. We quickly dress, me slipping back into the pajama shorts Nickolas had removed earlier without ripping them this time, and him pulling on the jeans I had helped him out of just hours before. "Let's go," he says, grasping my hand tightly as he pulls the door open.

The moment we step out, a gasp escapes my lips, my eyes widening in horror at the scene before us. Chaos reigns everywhere, the entire castle engulfed in flames. But it's not the fire that has my heart racing in terror. Lying just outside our door is the lifeless body of a vampire, his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling.

We cautiously move further down the hallway, only to be greeted by the sight of vampires and werewolves locked in a vicious battle. Werewolves shifted into their wolf forms, snarling and snapping at their opponents, while vampires, their eyes glowing a menacing red, lash out with razor-sharp claws.

I turn to face Nickolas, our eyes meeting in a moment of grim realization. "We're under attack," we say in unison, our voices barely audible over the sounds of snarling, growling, and the crackling of the flames.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

We burst out of the castle, our suspicions confirmed as an arrow whizzes through the air, aimed directly at Nickolas. He snatches it out of the air before it can pierce his flesh, but the contact burns his skin, the telltale sign of oak tree venom. Lord Easterlin is really here, and the battle has begun.

Nickolas tosses the arrow aside, his eyes flashing with rage as he moves toward the vampire who fired it, closing the distance in the blink of an eye. With a snarl, he plunges his hand into the attacker's chest, ripping out his still-beating heart. Blood drips from Nickolas's fingers as he watches the light fade from the vampire's eyes, a grim smile playing on his lips. In an instant, he's back at my side, his hand grasping mine tightly.

"Let's get you to safety," he urges, his voice laced with concern.

Despite allowing me to train, Nickolas is still reluctant to let me fight. I understand his worries, but he needs to realize that this battle is as much mine as it is his.

"I want to fight," I tell him, pulling him to a stop. He turns to face me, ready to argue, when another arrow streaks toward him. He catches it effortlessly, snapping the neck of the assailant before they can draw their last breath. I seize the opportunity to slip away from Nickolas, determined to find her. If Lord Easterlin is here, She must be too, and we have a score to settle.

I inhale deeply, catching her scent on the wind, mingled with the metallic tang of blood and the acrid smoke of battle. My brother's scent is heavy in the same area, and I pray he doesn't kill her before I have the chance. I unmask my own scent, feeling it's more fitting to fight Ember in the same form, and the presence of so many

vampires will make it less obvious. With my heart pounding in anticipation, I race toward the source of her scent, my blood singing with the thrill of the impending confrontation.

As I weave through the chaos, arrows whistle past me, but I don't waste time engaging the shooters. Someone else always takes them down, and I smile, knowing it's Nickolas protecting me. I push myself to run faster, but a sudden blow to my face sends me stumbling backward, my vision blurring. I shake off the disorientation, focusing on the vampire who grins at me, licking his lips in anticipation.

He lashes out again, but I dodge, my own claws extending as I slash across his chest. A hiss of pain escapes him, his eyes burning with fury.

"To think I thought you would be an easy kill," he snarls, glancing down at the gaping wound, blood pouring from the deep gashes.

"You thought wrong," I retort, sweeping his legs out from under him. I pounce on his prone form, my fist connecting with his face, driving his head into the ground with a sickening crunch. Grabbing his hair, I wrench his head from his shoulders, his blood splattering my face and chest. I toss the severed head aside, taking a shuddering breath. It's my first kill, but the horror I expected to feel doesn't come.

A scream of agony pierces the air, and I whip my head around, my eyes widening in shock. I don't hesitate, sprinting toward the source of the cry. There, I find a vampire pinning down another vampire on our side. I seize the attacker by the collar, hurling him to the ground before stomping on his throat and ripping his head off. The thrill of fighting in vampire form is intoxicating, the power coursing through my veins as I'm once again drenched in blood.

"Why?" the woman I saved asks, her voice trembling.

"Because you came," I reply, a smile tugging at my lips. The woman is the one from the refuge cave who accused me of poisoning them. I am so happy she came and joined us. She must have arrived this morning and encountered the war. Such perfect timing.

I turn to continue my pursuit of 'her,' but the woman grabs my hand, stopping me.

"I wouldn't have done the same for you," she admits, her eyes filled with a mixture of awe and confusion.

“It doesn’t matter,” I assure her before I take off running in the direction I’m picking up her scent.

Suddenly, a hand fists in my hair, yanking me backward as a fist slams into my face, sending me crashing to the ground. Gritting my teeth against the pain, I roll to the side and struggle to my feet as the vampire aims another blow at my belly.

“Come for me, but not my baby, asshole,” I growl, swinging my claws at the attacker. She dodges, and I aim for her stomach, but she twists away, my claws slicing through empty air.

“It won’t be so easy for you again, werewolf,” she taunts, and I freeze mid-kick, confusion washing over me. My scent is unmasked, so how could she know what I am? Before I can ponder further, a searing pain explodes in my back as an arrow buries itself deep in my flesh.

“Amelia!” Nickolas screams, his voice raw with terror as I stagger forward, the agony radiating through my body.

Through the haze of pain, I watch as Nickolas dispatches the vampire I was fighting earlier. I take a deep breath before moving my hand behind my back, fingers brushing against the blood-slicked arrow. Not allowing myself a moment’s hesitation, I grit my teeth and yank, the barbed arrowhead tearing through muscle and sinew.

White-hot agony lances through me, the world tilting violently as a strangled cry escapes my lips. Warm wetness blooms across my back, rapidly soaking through the fabric of my shirt as my lifeblood begins to pour forth. Nickolas moves toward me after tossing the vampire’s heart to the ground, his face etched with worry as he looks at me.

“I’m fine,” I assure him, even as the oak tree venom seeps into my bloodstream, weakening me. I reach out with my mind, checking on our baby, relief flooding me when I sense she’s unharmed.

“Mask your scent now!” Nickolas commands, scooping me into his arms. I comply without hesitation, feeling the effects of the venom lessen as my vampire nature is concealed once more. Nickolas takes off running, his grip on me unyielding.

“No, I haven’t found her,” I protest, trying to make him stop, but he ignores my pleas, heading toward the castle and the underground safe room where the children and non-combatants are sheltered.

Nickolas lowers his mental walls, and I’m overwhelmed by the

depth of his emotions. The fear of losing me consumes him, a terror so profound it steals my breath.

"I couldn't live if you were gone, little one, or if something happened to both of you. I'm sorry, but I have to get you to safety," he says, his voice cracking with emotion.

Suddenly, he skids to a halt, his body tensing as a figure emerges from the shadows ahead.

"Hello, Nickolas. We finally meet," Lord Easterlin says, a cruel smile twisting his lips.

"Callum," Nickolas snarls, his body vibrating with barely contained rage.

"I'm so sorry you had to lose your only remaining family during our last encounter," Lord Easterlin taunts, his voice dripping with mock sympathy.

"I will keep my promise," Nickolas vows, his arms tightening around me.

"We shall see about that. Shoot him down!" Lord Easterlin commands and my eyes widen in horror as a hail of arrows streaks toward us.

Nickolas spins around, shielding me with his body as I squeeze my eyes shut, bracing for the impact. But instead of the sickening thud of arrows finding their mark, I hear the crackling of flames. My eyes fly open to see Alissa standing nearby, a fierce grin on her face as she incinerates the arrows mid-flight.

"What are family for?" she quips, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Thank you," I breathe before turning to Nickolas. "Go after him," I urge, holding his gaze. He starts to argue, but I place my hands on his chest, cutting him off.

"I promise to be safe," I assure him, my voice steady despite the chaos raging around us.

"Amelia," he whispers, his eyes softening with love and concern.

"Don't worry about me. I will be safe. Go after him," I insist, knowing how much Nickolas needs to end this, to avenge his family and protect our future.

"I love you," he says, capturing my lips in a kiss.

"I love you too," I reply as we break apart, and he sets me down gently before taking off in pursuit of Lord Easterlin.

The sound of clapping reaches my ears from behind. I spin around, fury erupting inside me like a volcano at the sight of her.

“You two make such a wonderful couple,” Ember says, her voice dripping with false sweetness.

“Ember,” I growl, my body tensing for the fight to come.

“Let’s get this over with, shall we?” she taunts, a wicked grin spreading across her face as she charges toward me.

I meet her head-on, shifting into my wolf form as I leap at her, my jaws snapping and my claws extended. Today, only one of us will walk away from this battle, and I’m determined to be the one left standing.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

NICKOLAS

I take off sprinting in the direction I'm picking up Callum's scent, my heart pounding with a mixture of rage and anticipation. The bastard knew he stood no chance against me, so he fled, but there's nowhere for him to hide today. I will hunt him down and make him pay for everything he's done.

I risk a glance over my shoulder at Amelia, my chest tightening as I watch her shift into her wolf form mid-leap, ready to face Ember in battle. Every instinct screams at me to turn back, to fight by her side and protect her, but I force myself to keep running. This is her fight, and as much as it tears me apart, I know she needs to do this on her own. She wouldn't want me to interfere, no matter how much I longed to keep her safe.

Gritting my teeth, I push myself harder, Callum's scent growing stronger with each stride. Before, I wanted to kill the bastard for driving Amelia to the brink of suicide, but now, with the deaths of Uncle Leo and Ava weighing on my soul, my thirst for vengeance is insatiable. My hands itch to rip him apart, to make him suffer as he's made us suffer.

Suddenly, an arrow whistles through the air, aimed straight at my heart. I snatch it out of the air with lightning reflexes, my eyes slowly lifting to glare at the fool who dared to attack me. The archer's eyes widen in terror. Good! He knows his death is coming.

In the blink of an eye, I'm in front of him, driving the arrow through his chin and out the top of his skull. His eyes remain wide as he crumples to the ground, and I catch sight of Callum cursing before he turns tail and runs.

A smirk tugs at my lips. The idiot thought his lackey's arrow would be enough to stop me. If only he knew the grueling training my men and I have endured to ensure our victory. I give chase, closing the distance between us in heartbeats. My hand fists in the back of Callum's collar, forcing him to a halt, but he's ready for me. He spins, his fist connecting with my jaw, but I block the blow and counter with a punch of my own, feeling the satisfying crunch of his jawbone shattering beneath my knuckles. Blood sprays from his mouth as he staggers back, spitting out broken teeth.

"I guess I'll just have to kill you myself," he snarls, assuming a fighting stance, his fists raised.

"I'd love to see you try," I taunt, aiming another punch at his face. This time, he manages to block it, retaliating with a strike to my stomach. I catch his fist with my left hand, using the opening to deliver a devastating uppercut to his chin. His head snaps back, and he stumbles, his eyes glazed with pain.

"It seems I have to take things up a notch," he growls, his claws extending as he slashes at my chest. In a risky move, I grab his wrist, intending to snap the bone, but it leaves me vulnerable. His other hand rakes across my face, tearing flesh and drawing blood. I snarl in pain and fury, but before I can react, he headbutts me, my vision blurring as my nose shatters.

"Fuck!" I roar, shaking my head to clear the double vision, but Callum seizes the advantage. He sweeps my legs out from under me, and I hit the ground hard, the air rushing from my lungs as his boot slams down on my chest, grinding me into the dirt.

"I've waited centuries for this moment," he gloats, keeping me pinned as he draws a blade from behind his back. I struggle to dislodge his foot, pushing with all my strength, but he only presses down harder, my ribs creaking under the pressure. Desperate, I search for anything within reach that could turn the tide, but there's nothing.

Callum crouches over me, bringing the blade to my heart, the tip pressing against my skin. I realize with a jolt of fear that it's laced with oak tree venom. Gritting my teeth, I grab the blade with both hands, ignoring the searing pain as it slices into my palms, my blood mingling with the poison. We grapple for control, neither of us gaining the upper hand, our muscles straining with the effort.

Suddenly, a wave of fear washes over me, but it's not my own. My eyes widen in horror. Amelia. Something's wrong. Panic rises in

my throat, threatening to choke me, and for a moment, the knife inches closer to my heart.

But the thought of dying here, of failing Amelia when she needs me most, ignites a fire in my veins. With a burst of desperate strength, I begin to turn the tide, pushing the blade back inch by hard-fought inch until Callum's weight is lifted from my chest. He stumbles back, his eyes wide with disbelief and dawning fear.

I surge to my feet, a predatory smile spreading across my face. He knows his time has come. He doesn't even try to fight back, turning to flee, but I'm on him in an instant, tackling him to the ground and slamming my boot into his face, his skull cracking against the earth.

"You were easier to catch than I thought," I pant, hauling him up by the front of his shirt. I headbutt him viciously, feeling his nose shatter against my forehead, blood pouring down his face as he cries out in agony.

"Shoot him!" Callum screams to his men, desperation thick in his voice. A hail of arrows descends upon me, but I don't even flinch. Instead, I hoist Callum's broken body above my head, using him as a shield, a twisted grin on my face as arrow after arrow buries itself in his flesh.

"Stop!" he wails, his voice thick with pain and terror, but I only laugh, a deep, menacing sound that echoes across the battlefield. I toss his riddled body to the ground, standing over him as he coughs up blood, trying to crawl away from me.

"You're such a fool," I spit, advancing on him slowly, savoring the fear in his eyes.

"Nickolas, please, we can talk this out. I'll give you anything you want," he begs, his words garbled by the blood filling his mouth. I pause, throwing my head back in laughter, but it's short-lived. My face hardens into a mask of pure hatred as I crouch down beside him.

"Bring my uncle and aunt back to life, and then we can talk," I growl, my claws extending as I trace them over his frantically beating heart.

"Nickolas, please," he sobs, tears mixing with the blood on his face. He's trapped, his legs riddled with arrows, unable to run.

"Say hi to your daughter for me," I snarl, plunging my claws into his chest and ripping out his still-beating heart. I close my eyes, feeling the warm, slick organ pulsing in my grip, his blood dripping

onto the ground at my feet. I take a deep, shuddering breath, a sense of grim satisfaction washing over me.

Opening my eyes, I stare down at Callum's lifeless body, a cruel smile twisting my lips. I reach down, grasping his head in my hands and wrenching it from his shoulders with a sickening crack. Rising to my feet, I carry his severed head by the hair, striding across the battlefield like a conquering king.

As I pass, Callum's men falter, their weapons falling from nerveless fingers as they realize their leader has fallen. Only the most foolish would continue to fight now. But I know Ember won't be so easily cowed. She's too much like her father, too consumed by hatred and a thirst for vengeance.

My heart clenches with fear for Amelia, and I quicken my pace, praying to any god who will listen that I'm not too late. I can't lose her, not now, not after everything we've been through. She's the best thing that's ever happened to me, the light in my darkness, and I'll be damned if I let Ember take her from me.

Hold on, my love. I'm coming for you.

AMELIA

Ember's fist connects with my ribs in a blindsiding blow, the impact sending shockwaves of pain through my body as I crumple to the ground. Gritting my teeth, I force myself onto all fours, circling her warily, my wolf form bristling with fury.

"Pathetic. You couldn't even fight me in your real form," she spits, her words dripping with disdain, baiting me to shift back and risk further injury.

I bare my fangs in a feral grin, lunging at her, my jaws snapping for her throat. She reacts instantly, grasping my muzzle in her hands, struggling to keep my razor-sharp teeth from her flesh. Seizing the opening, I rake my claws across her chest, shoving her to the ground with a powerful kick. Pinning her beneath me, I tear at her face, my claws seeking to blind her, to rob her of her sight, and leave her vulnerable.

Ember's screams of agony pierce the air as I gouge at her eyes, blood welling beneath my claws. But before I can finish the job, an invisible force seizes my heart, squeezing the life from it. I collapse to the side, a pitiful whimper escaping my throat as the witch's spell constricts my chest, stopping the blood flow to my frantically beating heart.

I quickly change back, not caring I will be naked in front of everyone. I gasp for air, my lungs burning, the pressure easing slightly in human form, but the witch's hold remains, icy fingers of death around my heart.

I glare at the witch, her face etched into my memory, a new name added to my list of enemies. A bundle of fabric hits my naked body, and I glance up to see Ember tossing clothes at me, a mocking sneer on her bloodied face.

"I want to kill you, but I want to do it while you're in your true form. So you can know that you're no match for me," she taunts, wiping the blood from her ravaged eyes, deep claw marks scoring her once-beautiful face.

I pull on the jeans and shirt, my movements stiff and pained. Weakness still grips me from the witch's attack, but the baby and I will be fine. But another worry gnaws at me—I can't fight Ember in her vampire form. With the oak tree venom coursing through me, I know I'm no match for her. She's cunning, deliberately exploiting my weakness. Assessing the toll on my body, I decide on vampire form. Oddly enough, it seems like the safest choice for both the baby and me.

"I see you're even more foolish than I thought," Ember sneers, her eyes glinting with malice.

"Bring it on, bitch," I snarl, launching myself at her with preternatural speed, my fist slamming into her face with a sickening crunch. Blood gushes from her shattered nose, but she retaliates with a vicious headbutt, stars exploding behind my eyes as my vision swims.

I shake my head, trying to clear the fog, but Ember is relentless. Her elbow cracks against my jaw, pain lancing through me as I feel the bone break, the coppery taste of blood filling my mouth.

Ignoring the white-hot agony radiating from my back, I press on, determined to end this before the venom saps the last of my strength. I lash out with my leg, aiming a crushing blow at her stomach, but my foot sinks into the ground, caught in a pool of quicksand that wasn't there a moment before.

"I never said I would fight fair," Ember gloats, a wicked gleam in her eyes.

"Bitch," I hiss, struggling to free myself from the clinging sand, but the more I thrash, the deeper I sink, panic rising in my throat as I realize the trap I've fallen into.

"You should know better than to struggle," she mocks, her fist connecting with my face in a brutal blow that snaps my head back, stars dancing before my eyes.

I swing at her blindly, but she dances back, staying out of reach, a cruel smile playing on her lips.

"This is going to be even easier than I thought," she purrs, stalking toward me like a predator closing in on wounded prey. She raises her hand to strike me, but I lunge forward, seizing her wrist in an iron grip, twisting until I feel the satisfying snap of bone.

"Fuck!" she screams, trying to wrench her mangled hand from my grasp, but I hold on tight, slamming my forehead into her face, feeling her already-broken nose crunch under the impact.

She reels back, clutching at her ruined face, blood streaming between her fingers. "You stupid bitch, you broke my nose again," she shrieks, her voice thick with pain and rage.

I grin through the agony, a small victory in the face of impossible odds. I may not be able to use my legs, but I'll be damned if I go down without a fight.

Ember sees the defiance in my eyes, and her face contorts with fury, her eyes blazing with hatred. "Pull her down. It's time I ended this bitch once and for all," she commands, and before I can blink, massive hands made of sand erupt from the ground, seizing my arms in an unbreakable grip, dragging me down, down, down.

I thrash against my bonds, but it's useless. The more I struggle, the tighter they hold until I'm pinned to the ground, helpless and exposed. Ember looms over me, a wicked-looking knife in her hand, the blade gleaming with the telltale sheen of oak tree venom.

Panic seizes me as I realize this is it, the end. If that blade pierces my heart, it's over. I'll never see Nickolas again, never hold our child in my arms. Desperation lends me strength, and I buck against my restraints, but they hold fast, unyielding as stone.

I mask my scent with my last ounce of power, praying it will be enough to protect our baby, to lessen the damage. White-hot agony explodes in my chest as Ember plunges the knife into my heart, the blade grating against bone, tearing through muscle and sinew. I clench my teeth so hard I taste blood, refusing to give her the satisfaction of hearing me scream.

The sand releases me, and I lie there, gasping for breath, the venom spreading through my veins like wildfire, sapping my strength and my will to fight. Ember stands over me, a triumphant

smile on her face, drinking in my suffering like the sweetest wine.

She turns to walk away, and a rage, unlike anything I've ever known, surges through me, burning away the pain, the weakness, the fear. No. It can't end like this. I won't let it.

Consequences be damned, I unmask my scent, feeling the power flood back into my broken body. I surge to my feet, tackling Ember to the ground, straddling her chest, my hands closing around her throat.

"You're not dead, you bi—" she starts, but I silence her with a punch to the mouth, my fist slamming into her face again and again and again until her lips are a ruined mess of blood and broken teeth.

I claw at her eyes, shredding the delicate tissue, blinding her, robbing her of the one advantage she had over me. Ember screams, her hands flailing uselessly as she tries to fight back, but I dodge every blow, lost in a haze of fury and bloodlust.

My claws rake across her chest, tearing open the flesh, painting us both in a spray of crimson. I'm so lost in the frenzy of violence that I almost don't notice the pile of sand burying me, trying to drag me away from my prey.

I whip my head around, ready to face the witch, but what I see stops me cold. The blood-poison accuser, the woman I saved, is fighting the witch, her face a mask of determination as she dodges the balls of sand hurled her way.

"Thank you," I whisper, my heart swelling with gratitude, with the knowledge that I'm not alone in this fight.

"Anything for our queen," she replies, a fierce smile on her lips as she dances out of the witch's reach.

I gasp, stunned by her words, by the loyalty in her eyes, but there's no time to dwell on it. Ember is struggling beneath me, trying to flip us over to regain the upper hand. I dig my knees into the ground, using my weight to keep her pinned, my hands finding her throat once more.

She swings at me blindly, her movements clumsy and uncoordinated without her sight to guide her. I bite into my wrist, tearing open the flesh, and force the wound against her mouth, my blood pouring down her throat, tainted with the oak tree venom that's slowly killing me.

"Get off me! Fucking get off me!" Ember screams, thrashing beneath me, but I hold fast, forcing her to drink, to take the poison

into herself.

"Let's begin," I purr, a manic grin spreading across my face as I feel the venom burning through my veins, inching ever closer to my heart. I don't have much time, but I'll make every second count.

I flip myself around, straddling Ember's legs, my hands closing around her ankles. "What are you doing?" she asks, her voice high and thin with panic, and I smile a cold, cruel thing.

"You'll find out soon enough." I grab her feet in an iron grip, and with a savage twist, I rip them from her legs, the bones snapping like kindling, the tendons tearing like wet paper.

Ember's scream is music to my ears, a symphony of agony and despair. I rise to my feet, planting my boot on her knee, and with a sickening crunch, I tear the joint from its socket, the limb hanging uselessly, a mangled mess of flesh and bone.

She shrieks, her body convulsing, her blood painting the ground around us in a macabre canvas. But I'm not done, not yet.

I kneel beside her, taking her hands in mine, these hands that have caused me so much pain, so much suffering. With a savage grin, I rip the fingers from their sockets, one by one, until her hands are nothing but bloody stumps, the digits scattered around us like gruesome confetti.

Ember's screams have faded to whimpers, her body too weak, too broken to fight anymore. The only sign of life is the shallow rise and fall of her chest, the faint flutter of her pulse beneath my fingers.

"It was nice knowing you, Ember, but I never want to see you again," I whisper, my voice cold and hard as I plunge my hand into her chest, my fingers closing around her heart.

I rip it from her body, holding it aloft, watching as the last spark of life fades from her ruined eyes. And then, as if a dam has broken inside me, the tears begin to fall, great, heaving sobs wracking my body as I clutch her still-warm heart in my hand.

"I fucking did it," I whisper, my voice raw and broken. "I killed her."

"Yes, my love. You fucking did," a familiar voice says from beside me, and I look up to see Nickolas, his body drenched in blood, not an inch of him left untouched, just like me.

I drop Ember's heart to the ground, the organ landing with a sickening squelch, and launch myself into his arms, burying my face in his chest as he holds me close, Lord Easterlin's severed head

dangling from his other hand.

Around us, the battle has stilled, the remaining enemies laying down their arms, their will to fight extinguished with their leaders' deaths.

"We did it," I breathe, my voice muffled against Nickolas's chest.

"Yes, we did," he murmurs, his arm tightening around me, holding me close, anchoring me in the storm of emotions raging inside me.

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EPILOGUE

Ten Years Later

"Aidan, please stop pulling your sister's hair," I plead, my voice strained as I descend the stairs. Aidan, my firstborn, attempts to rip raven locks from his twin sister Aliyah's scalp.

For nine-year-olds, Aidan's death glare is already perfected as his black hair falls over his face and emerald eyes shoot daggers at Aliyah. "She called me ugly, Mummy!" he huffs.

I turn my gaze to my daughter, pushing her dark hair behind her ears. "And why do you do that, Aliyah? You know better than to do that." Her own green eyes narrow at her brother.

"He called me fat!"

"I did not—" Aidan begins to argue, and I close my eyes, rubbing my temples as a familiar headache threatens to take hold. I adore my children, but sometimes...

The pattering of tiny feet makes my eyes shoot open. "Liam, Lily, be careful!" I rush after my second set of seven-year-old twins, who have inherited their father's striking features just like their older siblings.

"And you too," a deep, British voice murmurs behind me, strong arms wrapping around my swollen, nine-month belly. This little one will be our last; Nickolas had been content to stop after Liam and Lily, but the heavens had other plans.

"Nickolas," I breathe, melting back against his chest, his scent enveloping me like a soothing balm. "Your kids are stressing me out," I admit as the maid steps in, gently separating the bickering children and ushering them into the waiting car outside.

"Our kids, little one," he corrects, placing a soft kiss on my forehead.

"I know. Are you ready?" We're heading to Eric's for a family day out. Eric and Lily are doing great with three kids of their own.

“Yeah, let’s go,” he says. I take a step forward, only to halt abruptly as I feel a gush of liquid trickling down my legs.

My eyes widen, meeting Nickolas’s shocked gaze. We weren’t expecting the baby for another week. I can’t believe she’s coming already.

“I’ll get the midwife,” Nickolas says, rushing out the door, but I call him back.

“Help me upstairs first,” I say, grasping his hand. He nods, realizing his mistake. I shake my head, amused that even after two previous births, he still reacts the same way he did the first time.

He lays me on the bed, and for the next few hours, guttural yells tear from my throat as contractions rip through me. My fingers dig into Nickolas’s arm, drawing blood. This baby is proving to be the most challenging yet.

“It’s okay, little one. You’ve got this,” Nickolas soothes, wiping the sweat from my brow, seemingly oblivious to the crimson rivulets dripping from the puncture wounds I’ve inflicted.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper, my bottom lip trembling as I stare at the damage I’ve done.

“Hey, hey,” Nickolas cups my face, his eyes soft with love. “It’s okay, my love. See? It’s already healed.” He raises his arm, revealing only faint bloodstains where the wounds once were.

“I love you,” I tell him, tears welling in my eyes, my emotions heightened by the life growing within me.

“I love you too, baby,” he murmurs, brushing a tender kiss across my lips. “Are you ready?” he asks as the midwife emerges from between my legs, signaling it’s time. I nod, gripping his hand tightly.

“Yes.”

With each push, I squeeze Nickolas’s hand, feeling the bones break and mend beneath my grasp. Finally, as I draw in a shuddering breath, a piercing cry fills the room.

Tears stream down my face, the sound of our baby’s first wail hitting me with the same overwhelming emotion as it did with each of our children. I brace myself for another, but it seems she’s our only new arrival.

“Here is your beautiful baby girl,” the midwife announces, placing the tiny, towel-wrapped bundle in my arms.

“Hello, beautiful,” I coo, cradling her against my chest.

“She’s perfect,” Nickolas breathes, gazing at our daughter with

pure adoration.

“She has my eyes,” I say, smiling through my tears as I take in the most gorgeous blue eyes I’ve ever seen.

“Let’s see if she’s like her siblings,” Nickolas suggests, biting his finger and offering it to her tiny lips. I hold my breath, silently praying that this little one will take after me. Our other children are all vampires, and my heart yearns for a connection to my own kind.

My heart leaps as she turns away from Nickolas’s blood-tinged finger, and I cry out in joy, “She’s a werewolf!”

“I’m so happy for you, little one,” Nickolas says, kissing my forehead, his smile radiant as he looks upon our daughter.

I quickly expose my breast, offering her breastmilk since she is a werewolf, unlike her other siblings.

“What will you name her?” the midwife asks.

“Holly,” Nickolas and I say in unison, the name we’d chosen for a girl in honor of his mother.

“Welcome to the world, Holly Adams,” the midwife says, smiling down at our perfect creation.

As I watch our daughter in my arms, my mind wanders, reflecting on the incredible journey that has brought me to this moment. I am the queen of the vampire kingdom, a role I never could have imagined for myself but one I stepped into with surprising ease. Though some council members opposed my ascension, they were overruled by the warriors and the people I had helped. All of them wanted me as their queen, so the dissenting opinions didn’t matter. Nickolas was overjoyed, knowing he wouldn’t have to fight to make his subjects accept me; I had already won their hearts without even trying.

If someone had told me years ago that I would fall in love with the vampire king, become his queen, bear his children, and find the greatest happiness of my life with him, I would have called them mad. But here I am, living a life beyond my wildest dreams.

“I love you, you know,” I say, lifting my head and locking gazes with Nickolas.

He stares back at me, his eyes shining with adoration. “I know, and I love you too, little one.” He leans in, capturing my lips in a kiss that steals my breath. As I bask in the warmth of his love and the joy of our family, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the incredible life we’ve built together. I wouldn’t change a single thing.

The End.

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About The Author

Amal A. Usman

Amal A. Usman is a dark romance author. Her books often involve filthy rich, possessive heroes and love-to-hate relationships. She loves to spend her free time watching Asian dramas and crime series. She enjoys writing and wishes to reach more readers who love morally grey men.

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Books By This Author

My Cursed Mated

Liz has been told to reject her mate all her life, but her mom refuses to explain why. One day Liz meets her mate and does the opposite. She's heard stories about how amazing it is to find your mate and was excited to have found hers. She tries to build a relationship with him, but he doesn't want her. He causes her so much pain that she wishes he would reject her, but he doesn't. He wants nothing to do with her but will kill any living thing that tries to harm her.

How does Liz, who wishes to spend an eternity with her mate, change his heart?

A Second Chance

Melina Davis was born with the face and body of a goddess. Her heart was as beautiful as her, but it never did her any good. Melina was the most unlucky woman in this world regarding love. Her first love was an abusive con artist who made sure to exploit Melina's kindness. The second one Melina felt was genuinely worthy of owing her heart was far more dangerous than her first. His name is Thomas Costanzo. He is the second in command of the Costanzo mafia. He was highly feared in the mafia world. Some even feared him more than the don of the Costanzo mafia. Melina didn't know she shouldn't cross him, and she did. She broke the heart of one of the most feared men on this earth; now, he is out searching for her. Once he finds her, Melina will wish she had never crossed paths with him.

Bullied To Love

Katherine Luciano is a beautiful lady living with her single mom.

She did not know her life would take a different turn the day she goes for a job interview. She meets the one person she wishes she never sees again in her life. The one person who made her high school the worst time of her life, Lorenzo Costanzo. A well-known person in society. He has the looks, the fame, the money, and everything with a lot of mysterious secrets.

Does she fall prey to his wrath once again, or change the heart of a cold man?

My Unwanted Billionaire

Eleanor Brown is a lovely lady trying to make ends meets. She lands a job after an unfortunate event happens to her. She is excited and can't wait to start a new chapter in her life. Unknowing to Eleanor, this new chapter of her life will be filled with a lot of troubles. Her boss, Jason Crawford, believes Eleanor wants to work for him for other reasons, and since he can't fire Eleanor, he decides to make things difficult for her.

Will Eleanor survive working with a boss who hates her, or will she quit and back off the deal even though she needs money?

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